

being a faithful church



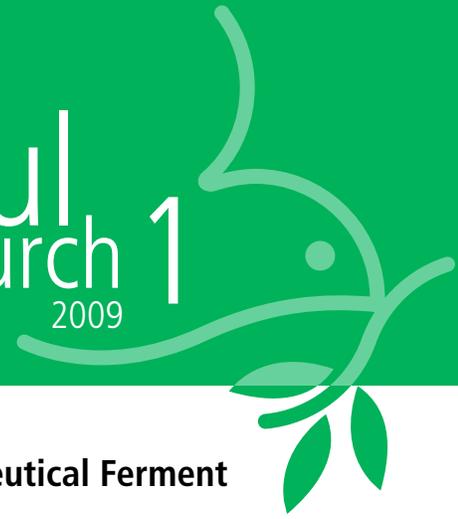
- BFC 1: Testing the spirits in the Midst of
Hermeneutical Ferment
March, 2009
- BFC 2: "Peace Church" as "Pacifist Church"
July, 2010
- BFC 3: A Plan to Discern Faithfulness on
Matters of Sexuality
July, 2011
- BFC 4: Using the Bible in Helpful and
Unhelpful Ways
July, 2012
- BFC 4.1: Exercising our Interpreting Muscles:
Testing our Interpretive Framework
Sept, 2012
- BFC 5: Between Horizons: Biblical
Perspectives on Human Sexuality
Nov, 2013
- BFC 5.1: Between Horizons: Biblical
Perspectives on Human Sexuality
Assembly 2014 Discernment Guide
April, 2014
- BFC 6: Unity, Christ's Love, and Faithfulness
in Discerning Matters of Sexuality
October, 2014
- BFC 6.1: Summary and Analysis of BFC 6
Responses
September, 2015
- BFC 7: Summary and Recommendation on
Sexuality 2009-2015
September, 2015
- BFC CM: Being a Faithful Church (BFC) Task
Force: Final Draft Recommendation
for July, 2016 Assembly
Dec. 14, 2015



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being a faithful church 1

2009



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment

Background

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. Some writers have, in fact, suggested that Canada is a country with “very hard soil” for the gospel of Jesus Christ: one of the hardest anywhere in the world. We face challenges, and each one is worth facing with the integrity of being the church.

The General Board understands that the ongoing health of our church requires that we continue to strengthen our overall capacity to discern¹ the mind of God as the church engages the critical agenda of our time. This need/capacity to discern is important in all aspects of our life together. It is important in how we worship, and in how we organize. It is also important in how we respond to questions of faithfulness that are within and among us. The General Board, along with other circles of counsel, tries to discern what the important themes are that require ongoing attention. Themes that have been identified in the last years 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.

The need to be a biblically-grounded people is not new, but it is important to re-ignite our commitment and our capacity to be a people of God’s Word. Specifically, this means that:

- 1) We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and explore the biblical teachings.
- 2) We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ. We are all sinners in need of God’s grace and we know that the Holy Spirit can lead us to further truth and to repentance where needed.
- 3) We covenant compassion and prayer for each other. Action recommended by General Board, Mennonite Church Canada; July, 2011.

1 The words “discern” and “discernment” come from the Latin *discernere*. *Cernere* means to separate, distinguish, or sift. *Dis* means to take off. It is a good word to talk about the need to sift, and to test what is among us. The Greek New Testament word most often translated as “discern” is *dokimazo* (used 31 times). This word, too, refers to testing, examining, and interpreting. It is a continuous process of faith in God and faithfulness to God.

- 4) We covenant to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other.
- 5) We covenant with God that as we discern his will for our lives and our fellowship we will seek to obey it, through his grace and strength.

Purpose:

This paper is a resource to help us think together how spiritual discernment may nourish our faithfulness to God’s will for the church in our world.

Why now?

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.

Hermeneutical²² diversity is not new, neither in Christian ecumenical nor Mennonite experience. Such diversity has been/is present in understanding God’s will in: circumcision, slavery, the role of women in ministry, pacifism, economic models, relation to creation, church structure, ecclesial authority and autonomy, and so on. It is important, therefore, to ask why we need to pay special attention to our capacity to discern within our denomination *now*. The answer, by necessity, is more related to the *art* of being the church than to the *science* of hermeneutical process. Basically, we believe that churchly faithfulness to scripture comes to life within an Anabaptist community through our common commitment to “sift,” and to seek clarity in our desire to be God’s obedient people.

- 1) As Mennonites, we believe that the church needs to be scripturally grounded, and that hermeneutics are ecclesially³³-based. Both of these elements signal to us that we need to take a close look at what is happening among us.
- 2) We are committed to being the church amid the spiritual unrest and ferment that is among us.

2 Hermeneutics comes from the Greek language, *hermeneutikos*, and refers to the skill of interpretation, the capacity to make something clear.

3 *Ecclesial* comes from the Greek New Testament word *ekklesia* which means “church.”

What follows is an attempt to think organically and organizationally about the ingredients/components that the task of careful discernment places before us. The Book of Proverbs says that:

Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with a multitude of counselors they succeed (Prov. 15:22).

This is wise counsel for us in our time too. We are not, of course, starting at point zero. Very much discernment and many processes are already a part of our experience as a denomination. None of what is stated here is meant to negate the efforts that have gone before. Indeed, quite the opposite. What is stated here is building on these efforts and is made possible only because of these many other encounters and processes that are already part of our communal experience. We acknowledge each of these with gratitude.

The Ongoing Task: Is Discernment Necessary?

Seeking clarity in faithfulness in Christian life is the never-ending, non-optional vocation of God's people. Such discernment is a critical component of the ongoing learning needed for faithfulness in the world. Several biblical texts remind us of this ongoing task:

Luke 12:54-56:

Jesus teaches that "interpreting the times" (literally: the *kairos* of God) must be as constant a discipline of the church as understanding weather patterns that shape our life. He laments the lack of capacity to do that. The inability or the unwillingness to discern the times is either due to hypocrisy, creates hypocrisy, or both.

Matthew 18:1-35 (see also John 20:22-23):

One of the amazing, and in its context, heretical tasks given to the church is to deal with sin: to discern it, to forgive it, or to retain it. That this task is given to the "two or three" as they gather together in the name of Christ is a very large and, heretofore, inconceivable responsibility. The assumptions till then had been that this was the sole responsibility of God. The first step in dealing with sin is to discover it and to name it. The criteria for doing so are not provided in this text. This must be the ongoing vocation of the gathered church.

I John 4, 5:

The potential for false teaching within the church is significant. The church's discipleship/faithfulness antennae must always be on high alert. The church is given the task of "testing the spirits, to see if they are of God" (I John 4:1). The reason for this is because the spiritual sources of common wisdom and practice may not always be readily evident, i.e. it is not always immediately clear which "spirits" are nurturing common assumptions.

John 16:1-15:

Jesus promises his disciples that when he leaves he will send the Spirit, the Paraclete, to accompany them. One of the key functions of this Spirit in the midst of the community is the ongoing task of teaching them what truth is, where it is to be found, and how it needs to be practiced. The hermeneutical community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit thus becomes the locus of authoritative discernment of God's will revealed in Holy Scripture and in contextual practice.

The common element in all of these passages is the assumption that discerning the mind of God in order to be a faithful people of God is an

ongoing task. Indeed, this is more than a mere task: it is a foundational vocation of what it means to be God's people, incarnate in the world, in order to save it from its destructive potential.

For Anabaptists, the authority of scripture is understood to be unleashed only when God's people carefully and prayerfully discern the will of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit guiding the church into an understanding of scripture that reflects God's will for the world. Scripture, according to this understanding, loses its functional authority for our world when the community becomes hermeneutically unfaithful or dysfunctional. Scripture and experience both point to two important ingredients as we engage the ongoing task of discernment:

- a) God has been with us. We can be confident in what has been. There is enough life lived, truth revealed, and wisdom absorbed that provide a sufficient platform for faithful living.
- b) God will be with us. We must be open to spiritual surprises. It is not that there is new spiritual truth invented, but the Spirit can uncover old truths for us in surprising ways. It is the ongoing, often vulnerable, responsibility of the church to remain open to the surprises that God may have in store for us.

These two ingredients may appear to be in tension. And they may generate misunderstanding, conflict, threat, and impatience. But both ingredients come from the same source, God, and we need not fear. It is the vocation of the church to walk in this tension.

Yet, even as the church engages the process of discernment, we confess that, at best, we will only understand "through a glass darkly [or in a mirror dimly]" (I Cor. 13:12). Our definitions and pronouncements are never the last word. Our discernment, too, comes under the judgment of the Spirit of Truth and the wisdom of God revealed in God's *kairos* (time) and in our *chronos* (time). Doctrine, theology, and confession do not replace the living Word of God, that continually brings us into fuller truth and understanding that reflects the eternal will of God for his world.

Practical Options

The practical implication of such ongoing discernment is that the church will always speak, and then it must always speak again. And when it speaks again, it will have three options, each of which can potentially be a faithful or an unfaithful option. Many examples could be given. We will limit ourselves to only a few:

- a) The church can repeat again what it has said before:

Example from the Bible: Jesus' reference to part of the shema as the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself."

Example from church history: Mennonites reaffirming their understanding of pacifism in spite of the persecution against them from without, and the pressures from within in the 16th century and during World War I and II.

- b) The church can modify what it has said before, given some new spiritual understandings. This would normally mean that it can move further but in the same direction that it has moved before.

Example from the Bible: Jesus' desire to fulfil and not to abolish the law with his six references to: "You have heard that it was said ... But I say to you..."

Example from church history: Mennonites slowly moving from an understanding of "non-resistance" to "non-violent resistance."

- c) The church can change what it has said before because new perspectives have become apparent and compelling, and shifting the relative authority of canonical voices has been discerned to be necessary.

Example from the Bible: The understanding of the "chosen people" to include the Gentiles in a new way, which in turn changed the understanding of circumcision and food laws in affirming what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Example from church history: The church's defence of slavery not being justifiable, and the equal role of women in the ministry of the church to be good.

There is always tension between *sufficient wisdom* and *spiritual surprise* as the church is intentional about discernment. Therefore, the church will not (cannot) know which of the three outcomes it will experience. Spiritual/biblical discernment ultimately is an exercise of faith in and submission to the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of God's community. The church always engages discernment on the foundation of what it has discerned before. Discernment does not mean that we are adrift or that there is no anchor. We are confident in the past presence of God with us, and the sufficiency of the wisdom that has been discerned. Discernment does not presuppose change, but it is open to surprises engineered by the Holy Spirit. This means that while the foundation is solid, where discernment will end up is not predetermined. It is open to the inherent tension of sufficiency and surprise. The church need not, however, fear. A discerning community will come to the point where it can say "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28). And this is the trust and faith that allows the church to be the church, engaging its God-given vocation of confronting sin and engaging obedience. Conversely, a church that avoids, refuses, or cannot engage its vocation of ongoing discernment cannot be the church.

Being a Faithful Church

Spiritual discernment engages us in deliberate processes that help us face the challenges in the life of the church. What is at stake, fundamentally, is not whether a previous position will be re-stated (spiritual sufficiency) or whether a new road will be forged (spiritual surprise). What is at stake is our capacity to be the church in fulfilling our ongoing vocation of discerning the *kairos* of God for our time. In other words, 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. It is very important not to lose sight of this fundamental focus.

This, however, begs an all important question. What are the ingredients that make the church the church as it engages tough and potentially divisive conversations? Let us suggest a few key ingredients that are foundational:

- 1) Understand that we are engaging a spiritual exercise. Spiritual discernment is not focused on personal preferences, peer pressure, social niceties, political correctness, scientific debate, or institutional

power. While all these undoubtedly shape and influence us, we must understand our process to be focussed on discerning the mind of God for our lives for our time. We have the full assurance that God's Spirit will be present, and that we need not fear the outcomes. And we can be grateful that God is God and we are not.

- 2) Understand that as a spiritual exercise, we will engage seriously the spiritual disciplines as taught to us by our Lord. Such a process needs to be bathed in prayer for each other, meeting together with each other, studying scripture together, fasting, worship, listening, celebration, discernment, conversation, and a commitment to learn.
- 3) Understand that we are engaging an ecclesial (churchly) exercise. We believe that in God's wisdom, the church has been called to be the primary vehicle for teaching and living out the good news of God's Kingdom present in the world. We are, therefore, confident that an ecclesial process is necessary, sufficient, and good for us at this time – and in fact at any time. In doing so, we are engaging conversations about the life of the church. It makes sense that those who participate would do so from the basis of a commitment to make the church strong and faithful.
- 4) Understand that God's Spirit and therefore God's wisdom are not confined to the church. Because this is a spiritual exercise, the domain for understanding the Spirit's work in the world is the world itself. This suggests that we should not be surprised to discover and learn spiritual truth from individuals, groups, society, science, politics, and institutions. "Interpreting the signs of the times" means to interpret what God is doing within and beyond the church in order to bring about his Kingdom.
- 5) Understand that by engaging an ecclesial process, internal to the church, we believe the church to be a priesthood of all believers. This suggests that all "priests" of the church are welcome to participate and each of these voices needs to be heard with integrity and sincerity. It does not mean that each priest stands before God in a way unaccountable to the priesthood. The priesthood of all believers does not mean full agreement of all priests with the priesthood. It does mean taking seriously the voice of the priesthood, even when our personal opinions or preferences may differ. It means being confident that God's Spirit will work through the church as a community of discernment as is promised in scripture.
- 6) Understand that our commitment to be the church as a priesthood of believers will mean that there will be those who want to advocate for the sufficiency of what has been discerned till now, and those who will advocate for change based on their view of the surprises of the Spirit through a re-reading of experience and scripture. It would be normal to have advocates in such a process, but we would understand that advocacy is done to strengthen the Body of Christ in faithfulness to God, not for the purpose of winning. Because advocates are needed in such a process, the process itself must not be polarized, much less adversarial.
- 7) Understand that such a process would, naturally, desire to come to a point of the church speaking again. As indicated, this might mean saying the same thing, modifying previous speech, or change direction from previous discernment. In other words, while the process may be long, it is not entirely open-ended.



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being a faithful church 2

2010



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment “Peace Church” as “Pacifist Church”¹

Background

This document builds on the first one: *Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment* (cf: Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 09). That companion document, affirmed by the Assembly delegates, is an essential foundation for this effort to move forward some of the key points of biblical/spiritual discernment.

That first document indicated that:

The General Board [of Mennonite Church Canada] understands that 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 (p.1).

Several themes were identified as critical in the life of our church at this time. These were (p.1):

- 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.

It also outlined the commitment needed to discern together (p.1):

- 1) We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and explore the biblical teachings.
- 2) We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ. We are all sinners in need of God’s grace and we know that the Holy Spirit can lead us to further truth and to repentance where needed.
- 3) We covenant compassion and prayer for each other.
- 4) We covenant to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other.

¹ The distinction between a “Peace” and a “Pacifist” church is made to honor the many in our ecumenical circles who readily identify with the “peace” agenda and understand themselves to be churches committed to peace, but who would not understand that to mean a commitment to nonviolence and pacifism. Indeed, for most in those circles, being a peace church is compatible with a firm conviction that violence and war can, under certain circumstances and according to certain criteria, be “justified.”

- 5) We covenant with God that as we discern his will for our lives and our fellowship we will seek to obey it, through his grace and strength.

And it explored the inevitable hermeneutical realities that we called “sufficient wisdom” and “spiritual surprise.” These mean that as we engage each other, our changing context, and our unchanging scripture within the embrace of the spiritual disciplines, the church has three interpretive options: to repeat what has been said; to modify what has been said; to change what has been said.

Purpose

In this second step we want to apply some of the principles of discernment to one of the themes that was identified, namely being a Peace Church. We trust that this can function as a helpful model for how other (many) issues can be addressed in the church.

It is important to emphasize and underline that the focus is to strengthen our capacity to discern God’s will; it is not to resolve the particular case-study we are using to “practice.”

Process

The process will consist of four sections:

- a) Reflecting on “the signs of the times” (Luke 12:54-56): What is there in our 20-21st century - Canadian/global environment that places this theme on our discernment-radar in a new way? Can we identify the contextual pressures that urge additional discernment on this matter?
- b) Listening to the biblical “voices” that have been “sufficient” till now: How have we interpreted the Bible so that it has inspired and convinced us that being a “Peace Church” means being a “Pacifist Church?”
- c) Listening to the biblical “voices” that (according to some) challenge this “sufficiency.” Are there biblical voices that need to be given more weight in our interpretations? Does God want to break in to our “sufficiency” with “spiritual surprise,” a renewed awareness of biblical voices that have either been neglected or given less authority?
- d) Understanding and committing to some critical tools that help us live into what we have found.

Being a Peace (Pacifist) Church: Contextual Considerations from the 21st Century:

For Mennonites, being a "Peace Church" has meant:²

- a. Rejecting the many arguments that see violence, if used well, as necessary, redemptive, and a useful instrument for peace-building;
- b. Maintaining a pacifist ethic in the face of militarization of our world and our nation;
- c. Articulating the viability and relevance of non-violent ways, even in the face of the brutality of crime, genocide, and the horrendous incidents of abuse of victims.

It is not easy to maintain such a "Peace Church" identity and ethic in our time. Specifically, pacifists are challenged to accept more fully the social, moral, and human responsibilities to address the evils around us in "realistic" ways that go beyond pacifist responses. We are challenged to not simply cling to what some consider outdated, irrelevant, and ideologically-driven-pacifist convictions. Our context, we are told, demands a different response. Some contextual evidence pointed to is:

- a) The threat to freedom and life symbolized by Hitler/Nazism;
- b) The variously described threats of Communism, axis of evil, rogue states, New Axis Pact,³ and outposts of tyranny;
- c) The threat of terrorism and terrorist groups;⁴
- d) The evils of ethnic cleansing and civil war;⁵
- e) The brutal realities within the refugee camps where millions are subjected to the worst kinds of abuse and injustice;
- f) The brutality of organized crime, gang-related violence and drug cartels;
- g) The evil of human trafficking, for various purposes such as sex trade, prostitution, child soldiers, and body parts.

Such a context, it is argued, demands initiatives and intervention that are deemed to be more "socially responsible" - but that challenge a "Peace (Pacifist) Church" identity. Some of these intervention strategies are:

- a) Increased military spending, and the resulting legitimization, attraction, and support of military recruitment, resulting in military intervention;

2 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), Article 22, p. 82.

"As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. He has called us to find our blessing in making peace and seeking justice. We do so in a spirit of gentleness, willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service. The same Spirit that empowered Jesus also empowers us to love enemies, to forgive rather than to seek revenge, to practice right relationships, to rely on the community of faith to settle disputes, and to resist evil without violence. Led by the Spirit, and beginning in the church, we witness to all people that violence is not the will of God. We witness against all forms of violence, including war among nations, hostility among races and classes, abuse of children and women, violence between men and women, abortion, and capital punishment."

3 These include states such as: China, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Belarus.

4 Most readily symbolized by Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden.

5 Key examples being: Darfur, Sudan, Rwanda, Congo, Colombia.

- b) Pre-emptive action/strikes/war to gain advantage in an inevitable conflict;
- c) Legitimization of torture;⁶
- d) Support for the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine (R2P);⁷
- e) Renewed eloquent and careful articulation and defense of "just war;"⁸
- f) Support for capital punishment and other "get tough on crime" initiatives;
- g) Justification of arms/weapons manufacturing and trafficking.

Biblical voices that have under-girded our Peace (Pacifist) Church identity:

The church's convictions that a pacifist ethic is faithful to the biblical witness, and is needed and possible, come out of a history of reading the Bible and, in turn, inform our reading of it. It is too much to say that we have created a canon within a canon. It is true that we have understood the biblical canon to contain within itself an ongoing debate about power, i.e., the appropriate kind and role of power in God's plan for the salvation of the world. As we view this debate within scripture itself, we have detected voices that, in our interpretation, lead us to understand that God's original and final strategic will is for the full reconciliation of the world (as seen in the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem). We further have come to believe that the fruit of the peace, justice, and reconciliation that God wills for creation must already be present in the seeds sown to achieve it. The congruence between original seed and ultimate fruit is a lesson applied to understanding the appropriate use of power. Some of the ways we have come to this reading of scripture are:

- a) Reading of the holy war tradition of the Old Testament alongside the voice of Isaiah who suggests that the Suffering Servant (not King David, Joshua, et.al.) is the paradigm that best reflects the will of God for his people's use of power (Isaiah 40-55);
- b) Reading the experience of the Exodus through the voices that suggest that we need to "stand still" and "see the mighty acts of God" (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; II Chron. 20:17), rather than engage in violent revolutionary activity for the purpose of liberating the oppressed;
- c) Reading the canon through Christo-centric lenses: namely that the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the normative paradigm for social, political, and ethical action;
- d) Focusing on key teachings of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said... But I say to you: Love your enemies;"
- e) Understanding the baptism/commissioning of Jesus as clarifying that God's preferred way is to combine kingship (Psalm 2: a royal Psalm) with suffering servant-hood (Isaiah 42: a Suffering Servant), as indicated by the voice from heaven;

6 We remember the nuanced distinctions of torture made by George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

7 The United Nations, the World Council of Churches, and the United Church of Canada are but some of the organizations that have formally adopted the R2P doctrines. Many who have not formally done so would resonate very much with them.

8 Note President Obama's speech in Norway upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize (December/09).

- f) Understanding the temptations of Jesus as refusing the Davidic assumptions for Messiah-ship, or more strongly stated, understanding the Davidic assumptions about ruling the nations as satanic (Mt. 4:1-11);
- g) Taking the lengthy and very detailed ethical and life-style instructions in how to live a life "not conformed to this world" (Romans 12) as authoritative and normative for the life of Christians now;
- h) Taking seriously that "the Lamb that was slaughtered" is the image that best defines the vocation and "the power of the Lion," and the only one "capable of opening the scrolls" of history (Book of Revelation).

All interpretation of the Bible gives greater or lesser weight to the particular voices found in scripture. The canonical reading of scripture that has become sufficient for the Peace (Pacifist) Church has, in effect, taken weight away from the biblical voices that can and have been interpreted as justifying Christian support of violence that promises to be redemptive, thereby urging Christians to take on the social, humanitarian, and religious obligation to become involved in it.

This interpretive process acknowledges that the reading of the Bible cannot be fully objective and unbiased. But, at the same time, it has integrity because it is transparent in the way biblical voices are acknowledged, and it is thus open to challenge, correction, and new insight. This transparency means that we acknowledge which biblical voices have been softened. Some of these are:

- a) The many references in the Bible that indicate that human participation in war, killing, pillage, and revenge are God-ordained and God-blessed;
- b) The classic interpretation of Romans 13 that appears, at first glance, to support the legitimate authority of government to insist that Christians participate in wars and conflict;
- c) The two-kingdom interpretations that suggest that scripture advocates for us to be citizens in two kingdoms at the same time, always obeying the ethics of the heavenly kingdom in our private and personal lives, and those of the earthly kingdom in our social and political lives;
- d) An ethically dualistic understanding of spiritual warfare that, similar to the two-kingdom perspectives, suggests that the preferred ethics of pacifism need to be suspended when dealing with the overwhelming power of Satan, the evil adversary;
- e) The multiple millennial views of scriptural interpretation that would see the spiritual struggle that moves history toward its culmination as a violent one that obligates Christians to participate in it, thereby postponing the non-violent strategies until the coming of the new age.

In this method of interpreting the voices in the Bible, scripture does not remain "flat." In other words, every small part of the Bible is read in light of the whole of scripture. This means that some voices gain greater or lesser weight. Not only is this inevitable, it is desirable, and it demands constant discernment and attention. This does not mean, however, that any voice is less canonical or less inspired by God to be present in scripture. Each voice plays a critical part in light of the whole, and in each case it is important to ask what we need to learn

from it and what it contributes to our understanding of God's will. It is important to note that the "scripture" that is recognized by the church as "holy" [an authoritative source and standard] is, exclusively, the entire "canon," i.e., when all the voices of the Bible are in relation with each other. The church has not authorized as "holy scripture" the individual voices of the Bible when they are isolated from each other and from the whole. This preference of "canon" makes discernment more complex but it also guards against scripture being used simply for ideological purposes.

This paper and this process are but one example of how we engage in this permanent discernment activity as a church.

The Peace (Pacifist) Church identity has been bolstered and under-girded by many voices from beyond the Bible. Some of these are:

- a) The post-New Testament church had a pacifist understanding of faithfulness during the first centuries before the Christian faith became obligatory in the Roman Empire (late 4th century A.D.). The witness of these early (and first) Christians has convinced the Peace Church of today that this was indeed the intention of Jesus and his disciples.
- b) The Peace Church understandings had important homes throughout the centuries before the emergence of Anabaptism in the 16th century, perhaps most evidently within the monastic movements and in the Eastern traditions of the church. The writings and witness of these early Christians have inspired the Peace Church of today in its interpretation of scripture.
- c) Key to our understandings of being a Peace Church is the recovery of this earlier vision of the church's vocation during the 16th century, especially by the Anabaptist movements in Europe. The Anabaptists understood faithfulness as radically following Jesus as Lord, and they were convinced that the non-violent, love-ethic of Jesus was normative also for his church. This teaching was perceived as a serious challenge to the state and the state-church and resulted in severe persecution of those who believed in this way.
- d) There are key persons, not all Christian, who have given voice to a pacifist understanding of life. Prominent among these are Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the Dalai Lama. This is encouraging while not authoritative for the Peace Church position.

Biblical voices used to challenge the Peace (Pacifist) Church identity:

The biblical interpretations indicated above have not been accepted, by and large, either within the larger church or beyond it. Indeed, while individual Christians may lean in these directions, it is rare to find a denomination that has an unequivocal stance as a Peace (Pacifist) Church. What has happened is that churches have advocated for "selective pacifism" based on "unjustifiable violence." For example, some denominations say that nuclear war can never be justified because it meets none of the criteria normally used to justify the use of force.

These more common understandings of selective pacifism or justifiable violence are also defended from a scriptural base within the Christian world. Indeed, the assumption is prevalent around (and within) us that Christian scripture allows and even advocates for a non-pacifist position. Others will readily agree that Pacifism is the ideal that Jesus and scripture point to, but it is not yet realistic to engage it fully.

Some of the biblical voices used to under-gird a call for a reinterpretation of the Peace (Pacifist) Church understandings are:

- a) The Old Testament concept that “sanctuaries” are needed to protect victims of abuse and violence. It is then assumed that sanctuaries will need to be protected with police and/or military power.
- b) The interpretations of Romans 13 continue to be important in pointing to a God-given obligation of the state to exercise authority for the sake of protection, and for the Christian’s responsibility to obey the authorities in exercising this task, even if this includes the use of lethal violence through military force.
- c) Jesus’ commitment to the poor, the marginalized, and the victims of oppression is used to justify the use of redemptive violence for the welfare and benefit of victimized persons. The overturned tables of money-changers in the temple, some say, is an indication of how Jesus’ wrath against victimizers is “holy wrath” that justifies extreme, and potentially violent, measures also from the church.
- d) The fact that eschatology (the focus on the future) pervades Christian scripture has made it possible to believe that ethics (e.g. Pacifism) can also be postponed for a future time when things are like they are meant to be. By the same token it is suggested that these ethics are not designed to live in the world as we experience it today.
- e) It has also become common to separate “creation ethics” from “redemption ethics.” This is very similar to the two-kingdom theory mentioned earlier, namely that there is one ethic needed for creation (the laws of nature that allow us to live in this world) and another for redemption (the laws of Christ that allow us to live in the world to come). Given that we live in the present creation as redeemed people means that we engage each ethic in its proper place. The implication, of course, is that redemption ethics are unrealistic for creation living.
- f) A good example of theological justification of military intervention for redemptive purposes can be seen in the World Council of Churches statement on R2P: “The responsibility to protect the vulnerable . . . is an ecumenical responsibility, conceiving the world as one household of God, who is the creator of all.”⁹

The Bible as a Window and a Mirror:

The steps taken thus far are very important in order to be a community of discernment. By engaging seriously in careful description of context and biblical interpretation, we more fully understand the dynamic, interactive relationship between the two.

Holy Scripture serves as a window for us. We can look into and learn from the lives of others as they struggle to be faithful. Even though they lived in different times and places and dealt with agenda that is not immediately ours, we can learn. For example, we can see the words of Jesus: “but I say unto you . . . , love your enemies” as a spiritual surprise spoken into a world that assumed that the holy desire of David for kingly rule had rightfully overshadowed the holy insight of the prophet Isaiah that the real paradigm for healing and salvation is to bear the sins of others, and to be willing to suffer and even die for them. These words continue as a spiritual surprise when spoken into our own dominant Christian and secular

contexts. Yet, this spiritual surprise flung into that context by Jesus has become the argument for sufficiency for Mennonites in our history.

Holy Scripture also serves as a mirror for us. We can see our own struggle for faithfulness mirrored in the lives of others in spite of the distance of time and space that seems to separate us. We experience in our context the seductive promise and the enslaving power of the dominant cultural/political/religious myth that lethal violence can be the seed of redemption and liberation. And we wonder how to respond when this enticing promise seems so logical to others. We hear the words of Jesus to “love your enemies,” and we understand his words as being spoken to us.

Now what? Living with the Process:

The discernment steps suggested thus far are not the only ones needed, but they are critical ones. We now understand more fully why we experience the pressure to re-examine what we have taken to be sufficient in our confession. We know now that this pressure does not emerge out of a desire to be less faithful but a sincere conviction that we can and should be more faithful. We know that it is not motivated by a desire to water down the gospel, but to grow in awareness of how to live it out more fully. We know that it is not inspired by a disregard for sacred scripture, but by paying attention to the passionate debate within scripture itself.

The discernment brings us to the point of sober reflection and prayer. We see with new eyes the significance of the matter before us. Indeed, it is so important that we know we should not rush to judgment. After all, we are standing on a strong foundation that has been discerned within the life of the church, and that has been “sufficient” for us. Only the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our Body - leading us to “greater truth” - based on our immersion in biblical wisdom - as it relates to our context - is enough to change or modify the “sufficiency” we have known till now. This is not an invitation to complacency or stubborn self-preservation; it is an invitation to trust that God’s strategic plan to

Church and Mennonite World Conference: Called Together to be PeaceMakers (1998-2003). In summarizing Mennonite understandings of “Church and Society” and “Nonviolence and Just War” it states that Mennonites “tend to mistrust the state” and “they tend to be critical of Christian involvement in government because of the use of violence involved and the possible corruption of power” (Art. 186). It then affirms that: “In situations of conflict . . . both Catholics and some Mennonites acknowledge that when all recourse to nonviolent means has failed, the state or international authorities may use force in defence of the innocent. For Mennonites, however, Christians should not participate in this kind of action” (Art. 187). This surprising affirmation is based on one of the few references to the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527) and not on the very frequently cited *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995). Interestingly, the *Report* then continues: “Mennonites hold to non-resistance on principle without exception, while Catholics affirm non-resistance, but allow for exceptions” (Art. 188).

In addition to the ambivalence indicated in these statements, it is also instructive to note the authoritative – yet fluid – use of “Confessions of Faith,” in this case our present *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and the *Schleitheim Confession*, even though they focus the same issues in vastly different ways. Added to those is the “*Report*” itself that, in some ways, is now considered as an “official” statement of Mennonite confession, even though it is ambivalent to both the *Schleitheim Confession* and our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

⁹ Mennonite ambivalence on our pacifist stance can be seen in the approved *Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic*

transform the world via the faithfulness of people within people-hood is sufficient. Our friends in Colombia used to say: "This is so urgent that we need to go slowly." This is wise counsel.

Our concern is to strengthen our capacity to discern the will of God for our lives. In the companion paper to this one¹⁰ we suggested that discernment inevitably leads to one of three options for the church: repeating, modifying, or changing what it has said. And so, where does this discernment take us now?

Are we confident and joyful in repeating what we have said? Have we seen or heard enough that would suggest modification? Are we convicted by the Holy Spirit, our context, and scripture that we need to change? Together we must develop the criteria that would inform our next steps. For now, we will leave this here.

But leaving it here does not mean dropping the agenda. The spirituality of discernment must continue, and to encourage that we could suggest several important things:

- a) **Take time:** personal time and Body of Christ time. We all know the important role that time plays in our efforts to move toward good discernment.
- b) **Pray:** alone and together. Articulating to God, in the presence of others, the essence of our search allows us also to listen to the voice of God within and among us.
- c) **Focus on faithfulness not fear:** This requires courage and transparency. Most of all it requires that we trust the work of the Spirit of God in our midst.
- d) **Cloak this process in the warmth of worship:** The key to communal worship is two-fold: acknowledge always that we seek the mind of God, and confess that we are in need of revealed wisdom that is rooted in God's transcendence.
- e) **Continue to listen to the biblical voices,** alone and together: Understand the voices as best we can. Make sure the voices are interpreted in light of the entire canon of authoritative scripture, especially also in light of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- f) **Allow the voices to speak from their time:** By looking into the window of scripture, we will surely discover dynamics of sufficiency and surprise that will be instructive for us.
- g) **Allow the voices to speak to our time:** By allowing scripture to function as a mirror for our context, we may be surprised at the sufficiency of what we understand or the newness based on the sufficiency we discern in scripture.
- h) **Continue to listen to the voices from our context:** The voices internal to the Body, by definition, are a very high priority. Among these will be those sensing the need for change and those committed to the paradigm of sufficiency that characterizes our people-hood. As a Body we also continue to listen to and engage the voices from beyond ourselves, because God's wisdom is not limited to the life of the Body.
- i) **Cultivate the virtues of humility and confession:** The track record of the church in history points clearly to the need for both.

Above all, let us embrace our vocation for discernment with joy and trust. It is our task. Let us: delight in scripture; become connoisseurs of context; embrace the pleasure of challenge; and cherish the journey. We have never yet fully "gotten it right," and we never will. We will indeed see only "through a glass dimly," which is another way of saying that we permanently live the holy tension of sufficiency and spiritual surprise. Yet God's track record is not fickle. God continues to extend forgiveness and, despite the church missing the mark, God continues to invite and welcome us to the table. Within this reality we are committed to discerning faithfulness approved by God. May it be so.

Robert J. Suderman
General Secretary
July, 2010

¹⁰ Cf: *Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment* (Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, July/09)



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment A Plan to Discern Faithfulness on Matters of Sexuality

Being a Faithful Church Part 3 was presented at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2011 (Waterloo), where received the approval of the delegate body based on the following recommendations:

Delegate Actions: Mennonite Church Canada Delegate Assembly, 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.

Action recommended by General Board, Mennonite Church Canada; July, 2011.

Brief Review:

The questions, responses, and plans articulated in this document are built on the previous two resources that have been processed with the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada at Assemblies 2009 and 2010.¹ It is important to understand this document as fruit of a process that we have already engaged. What is articulated here needs to be processed by the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada congregations and Area Churches.

- a) The first discernment paper (June/2009) emphasized several important points:
- b) Discerning the will of God is the ongoing task of the church;
- c) Christian Scripture is foundational for the ongoing discernment of the church;
- d) Christian Scripture can be interpreted in different ways depending on which voices gain dominance and which ones are less dominant;
- e) The church will want to speak what it understands so that it can live accordingly;

- f) We do not discern in a vacuum; we have previous statements (e.g., The Confession of Faith) and these are sufficient as a foundation for our life together until something else is discerned;
- g) Through discernment, the church speaks again and either confirms what it has said before, modifies what it has said, or changes what it has understood.
- h) We can trust that God's Spirit will guide our discernment;
- i) It is important to discern in a "churchly way," and focus on that, rather than pre-determine where we want to get to;
- j) What is most important is that we have exercised the discernment in a Spirit-filled manner befitting the Body of Christ, and have done so as well as we can.

The second discernment paper (July/2010) applied some of the basic principles of reading and interpreting the Bible to the question of being a Peace Church:

- a) We identified the form of scriptural interpretation that has led us to affirm our Peace Church-Pacifist identity;
- b) We identified how we have dealt with the scriptural voices that are used by others to deny a Peace Church-Pacifist emphasis;
- c) We identified contextual realities that pressure us to change the style of our discernment and the conclusions we reach;
- d) We indicated that we need to define the criteria that we would need in order to test the spirit of the voices within and beyond scripture;
- e) We indicated that this same ongoing discernment is needed for any challenge facing the church.

Sexuality in the life of the church:

Issues related to sexuality in the life of the church are among the challenges that precipitated the General Board's sense that we need to strengthen our corporate capacity to discern the will of God. The challenges we face are many. It is important to discern the appropriate response of the church to the realities it faces, such as: cohabitation and common law marriage, same-sex committed relationships, extra-marital sex, pornography, and perhaps others. There is some public disagreement in our Body, and this causes private pain that is very real. We yearn to be healthy, but we are hurting. These hurts and the potential divisions lead us to a sense of urgency to discern again our understanding of sexual fidelity in the Christian life and in the Church.

¹ Being a Faithful Church: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment (Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 09); Being a Faithful Church 2: Being a Faithful Church 2: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment: "Peace Church" as "Pacifist Church" (www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre)

Our sincere desire is to be a witness to the presence of God's reign within us, among us, and in the world.

The General Board has discerned that it is important at this time to reconnect the broader discussion about discernment with the specific challenge of issues related to sexuality in the life of the church. The church needs to face these challenges, and needs to do so as part of the joyful task of being the church in Canada in the 21st century.

A suggested timeline for this stage of the "Becoming a Faithful Church" process:

- 1) July 2011 Assembly: Discussion of parameters for the next 4-5 years. Process to be adapted and approved by delegates.
- 2) September 2011- March 2012: Discussions of criteria to guide interpretation of Scripture.
- 3) July 2012 Assembly: Approval of criteria for interpretation. A study theme will focus on scriptural interpretation.
- 4) Sept 2012 to March 2013: Begin discussions on sexuality in the life of the church with reference to specific questions such as cohabitation and common law marriage, same sex relationships, extra marital sex, pornography, or other issues, and prepare a presentation for the 2013 Assembly.
- 5) July 2013 Assembly: The Church will begin to speak into issues as it is ready.
- 6) Sept 2013 to March 2014: All parties are invited to reflect on preliminary discussions/decisions made at Assembly.
- 7) July 2014 Assembly: Mennonite Church Canada will speak again on some of the issues identified in this process.

Next steps:

We are a Christian/Mennonite denomination. Different parts of the denomination play different roles in discernment. This paper focuses on the role of the central denominational structure in moving discernment forward. It is important to understand this limitation. This paper does not outline processes that may be used in congregations or Area Churches.

While the first two papers suggested a framework critical for communal discernment to happen and applied this framework to the challenge of being a Peace Church, this paper takes us into the nitty-gritty of healthy, ecclesial discernment. An important part of such discernment is to name and agree to basic issues of who, what, where, when, and how. To facilitate delegate discussion, the General Board has identified some of the key questions that require common understandings to move ahead. There may be others that should be named as well. The General Board has also provided responses to these questions. These responses represent the framework of a plan. They need to be tested/edited/ approved by Mennonite Church Canada delegates. In this way, we hope to move forward together.

As we begin:

- 1) We need to be intentional about inviting our discernment to be guided by the Holy Spirit. How can we do that?
 - a) We invite the Holy Spirit into our discernment when we undergird the process with our best spiritual disciplines, like prayer, careful study of scripture, worship, meditation, fasting, use of the arts, and more (Some of these have already been laid out in the previous papers.)
 - b) Listening well to our community is central to allowing for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Good listening will include sharing our experiences of God's leading, practicing respectful conversation, allowing for silence, and being clear on the ground rules of discussions.
 - c) We invite the Holy Spirit to guide us when we resist the temptation to predetermine the outcome of our discernment.
 - d) To allow the Spirit to lead, we are intentional about opening ourselves to wisdom from outside of ourselves and our immediate circles. We acknowledge that God's Spirit blows where it wills, and sometimes God's wisdom surprises us and comes from unexpected places.
 - e) We pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to agreement in our discernment, but we recognize that we may feel the Spirit nudging us in different directions. We commit ourselves to listening carefully in an ongoing way to the dissenting voices and recognize that the Spirit is also guiding the church through them.
 - f) We invite the Holy Spirit to deepen our understanding of how the life of Christ and his cross unite us in spite of our differences and disagreements.
- 2) We understand scriptural authority as foundational in the life of the church. How do we make this real?
 - a) We understand that the Bible's authority comes alive in the life of the church when Scripture is open, in the midst of the church, with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of such discernment guides the life and faith of the church.
 - b) The participation of the membership of the church is, thus, critical to the process of discernment.

A) Questions about responsibility and authority:

- 1) Who has the responsibility/authority to lead and facilitate the discernment process for the whole denomination?
- 2) Who has the responsibility/authority to set the timeline that will guide the process?
- 3) When a multi-stage process of discernment is going on, who has the responsibility/authority to declare an acceptable consensus to move ahead to the next stage?
- 4) Who has the responsibility/authority to speak on behalf of the church?

Response:

- a) Mennonite Church Canada's polity identifies two levels of membership: congregations and Area Churches. Final responsibility/authority lies with the delegates chosen to represent these members.
- b) Mennonite Church Canada's by-laws give responsibility/authority for the ongoing care and decision-making process to an elected General Board and its officers. This board has representatives from Area Churches, congregations, program councils, Faith and Life Committee, and members-at-large.
- c) There are other key circles of consultation and discernment that help the General Board in its discernment. One is a group made up of the Area Church Moderators and Executive Leadership, and the Area Church Ministers. Another is the Faith and Life Committee. Another is the Executive Staff of Mennonite Church Canada. Another is the Executive Committee of the General Board. Others are the Program and Finance Committees of Mennonite Church Canada. The General Board also consults broadly with other groups as needed.

B) Questions of Process:

- 1) How will we assure that we have a process that allows all concerned to participate?
- 2) What is the time-line that will be used for decision-making?
- 3) What is the process that will be used to "speak again?"
- 4) What are the key questions that will be addressed?

Response:

- a) Study and feed-back instruments will be designed, and the Mennonite Church Canada constituency will be encouraged to respond.
- b) Care will be taken to make the mechanisms of response as user-friendly as possible.
- c) These responses can be individual, congregational, or by interest-group.
- d) All responses will be compiled and considered seriously as the process moves ahead.
- e) This plan (*Being a Faithful Church 3*) will be recommended by the General Board to the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in July 2011. Delegates will have opportunity to amend, approve, or reject the plan.
- f) Some parts of the plan (see below) will be worked at after July 2011, and a comprehensive report for discussion and affirmation will be presented to Assembly/2012.
- g) It is hoped that in this process, the key questions that need to be asked and answered will emerge. These questions will be presented and approved in Assembly/2013.
- h) Depending on the questions that are identified, and the time needed to prepare for them, Mennonite Church Canada will begin to "speak again" in Assembly/2014. It is anticipated, however, that this will be a multi-year process, because it is unlikely that all questions can be addressed at the same time.

C) Questions of Content:

- 1) What criteria will be used to weigh the voices of scripture so that they will help us decide whether our "speaking again" will be saying the same thing, modifying our previous speech, or saying something new?
 - a) This very important question needs careful attention and must be addressed for discernment to happen in ways that have spiritual integrity. We will encourage broad participation and feedback from all constituents who wish to shape the discernment. The criteria will be shaped together.
 - b) A feed-back tool will be developed to facilitate this participation. We are confident that this exercise will strengthen our sense of being a biblical people, and offer guidance to our congregations and beyond to others who also are struggling with issues of discernment.
 - c) The spiritual discernment will be sifted, organized, and compiled so that the sense of the respondents can be identified. The hope is that a framework will emerge that will help us interpret the voices of scripture in faithful and relevant ways.
- 2) What alternatives within the Body will be available for those who will choose to exercise an alternative understanding?
 - a) The fruit of the process of discernment should not be the injury and division of the Body, but the faithfulness of the Body. Yet, it is possible that not all will embrace the outcomes. Sometimes faithfulness involves the creation of new cells within the Body.
 - b) Together we need to think seriously about the ongoing role and presence in the Body of those who disagree with the outcomes of the discernment. The "democratic" answer, namely that if 51% are "right" then 49% must be "wrong" is not good enough for the church. The answer that that you are "either for us or against us" is also not good enough for the church. Nor is the oft quoted political slogan "love it or leave" good enough for the church. There is no blueprint; it will need to emerge from our discernment process.

A way ahead:

Not everything can or should be defined at the beginning. Flexibility, informed by the process itself, is needed. But it is prudent and realistic to assume that some of the processes and decisions will require more time than others. It is also possible that the process itself will point to paths that are not yet contemplated in this document.

These are not sequential processes but parallel ones, i.e., they all need to be worked at simultaneously. The framework is before us. The General Board is presenting this plan for delegate approval.

A Watching World:

The challenges presented by the questions around sexuality are complex and can be divisive. There are lessons but there is no easy "menu" that we can borrow from other denominations to apply to our own process of discernment. Rather, our approach needs to be home-made, taking seriously the sensitivities, ethos, and processes that are assumed by Mennonite Church Canada[ians]. We need to apply our best expertise with boldness and humility, recognizing that we depend on God's grace

and timing and not our hopes and skills alone. In that spirit of bold humility, we move forward in hope that, by God's grace, the process and decisions we make will be what we can own as ours; that it will energize and unite us as a people; and that it will be a faithful witness to the watching world.

Having said this, we are keenly aware that others are watching closely: our young people and young adults (within and beyond our denomination); our sister Anabaptist denominations in Canada; our sister denominations in the USA; the leadership, and beyond, of Mennonite World Conference members; the ecumenical worlds we move in (EFC, CCC); the inter-faith world we are connected to; the disenchanting Mennonites (and others) who are no longer active in church life; the public media and press; and so on.

Will there be squabbling, in-fighting, power-plays, back-stabbing, anger, gossip, threats, and division? We want to be a people confident of our identity as faithful Christians, going about the vocation that is ours, practicing the love, forgiveness, burden-bearing, truth-telling, humility, sincerity, trust, and nonviolent spirituality that are embedded in our identity, our formal Confession, and our proclamation to others.

Will we understand the need for such a process as an unwelcome burden imposed on Christ's Body? Or will we understand the potential witness to others that this process offers? Will we engage each other with the joy of our vocation, which is to "discern the times [kairos]" (Luke 12:54-56), to "test the spirits" (I John 4:1), to "be worthy of our calling" (Eph. 4:1), "to live our life in a manner worthy of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27), and to be a "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) to a watching world?

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. Without that, our human efforts will fail. 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.

Conclusion:

We need to live what we proclaim, namely that the unity of the church is not of our doing, but is a gift of the Spirit that we celebrate. The Faith and Life Committee helped us understand this profound insight in 2006. They stated:

According to the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, unity is not our doing. We are bound together by something bigger than our own efforts and immeasurably greater than our failures. Unity in Christ is not something we choose to create; rather, it is the blessing of Christ's death on the cross granted to us. In Ephesians 2, Paul is talking specifically of how Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's mind there could be no division more radical, yet God through Christ broke down the barrier and placed the two enemies into one family.²

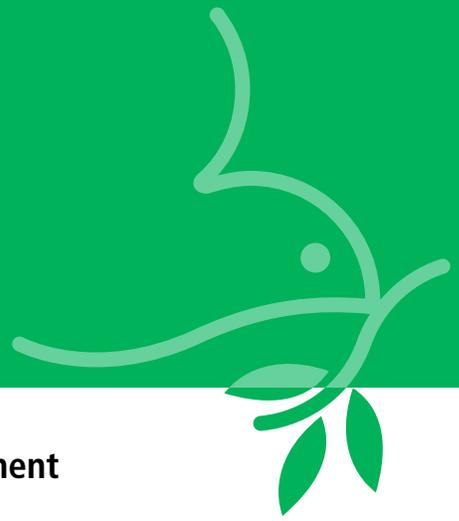
And we conclude with them:

There is nothing that can usurp the preeminent place of faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith and nothing else. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3: 28-29). We are chained together in peace by Christ through his death on the cross (Eph. 4:3).³

Mennonite Church Canada General Board
July, 2011

2 The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ; Presented by the Faith and Life Committee at the Annual Assembly in Edmonton (July 2006), p.2. (<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre>)

3 Ibid. p.3.



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways

Thank You...

The first word must be one of gratitude. Thank you to each one who participated in providing valuable feedback about how to use the Bible well for faith and life. Congregations, small groups, and individuals responded. There was also helpful feedback from a group of Bible scholars of the church. Many suggested that the exercise had been beneficial for your group or congregation. Most of you expressed appreciation for this effort to keep us biblically grounded as God's people. Thank you for the time and effort you dedicated. We are aware that for some of you, the effort was very substantial indeed. We are grateful for these insights from our part of the Body of Christ.

We have indicated from the beginning that the BFC process is happening *in the midst of hermeneutical ferment*. The responses have underlined the profound truth of that statement. The ferment goes much beyond concern about interpreting particular passages of scripture, or clarifying particular themes or questions. We are all aware of examples of misuse, or even abuse, of the Bible, and these make us anxious, lest we also be found guilty of exploiting it for personal or ideological purposes. A few respondents suggested that the Bible should be set aside because they do not see it as life-giving for our community. Most, however, in spite of an awareness of the complexities of the Bible, continue to affirm the life-giving nurture that scripture offers and they value the effort to

strengthen our capacity to understand scripture.

A Reminder of the Task:

Our focus is on being a faithful church and on how scripture helps us in this vocation. We asked you to be the teachers and to share with others what you have learned about the use of scripture in your Christian life and what you think others might learn from your experience.

We now want to reflect back to you what you have taught. And we want to make some suggestions about how this teaching can help us all in our vocation of being God's people.

The responses began by reminding us that we need to take great care in the words we use to define the task itself. For example, we had asked you to name some "criteria" that are helpful for interpreting scripture. Several suggested that "criteria" is not quite the right word because it may imply a set framework that can become more important than the text itself. This was not, of course, intended. Several alternatives were suggested: principles, assumptions, guidelines, indices, noticings, hermeneutical stance, elements, characteristics, framework, central paradigm for interpretation, bias of scripture, how scripture might function as a word from God for us, or simply what is most helpful in our reading of scripture. We appreciate this discussion because together these nuances help us to affirm our desire for scripture to function as an authoritative guide for our common life and faith.

"Stay on the Paths and Avoid the Ditches"

Reading the Bible and healthy biblical interpretation are complex processes. One scholar used a helpful image by suggesting that biblical interpretation is like a communal hike on which we try to "stay on the paths and avoid the ditches."³ This simple image is useful and can incorporate the nuances indicated above. The path we seek is to acknowledge the complexities of the hike but to see these complexities as an integral part of its adventure rather than as deterrents to faithfulness. We will use this image of "paths and ditches" to summarize the wise counsel we received in the responses.⁴

Paths to stay on:

1. The life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus are central and serve as the critical lens of interpretation that helps us understand all of scripture.⁵
2. Context makes a difference in how scripture is interpreted, understood, and applied for faith and life. Context refers not only to the importance of understanding the time and place out of which scripture emerged and to which it was addressed. It also refers to our time and place and how that impacts our understandings of scripture.⁶
3. Scripture already interprets scripture. It is very important to pay close attention to this inter-textual interpretation because this already gives us essential clues in the ways we need to understand how various passages relate to each other.
4. Jesus also interprets scripture. One response focused exclusively on trying to understand the "hermeneutics of Jesus," (i.e., how the Gospel writers portray the way Jesus uses and interprets the Old Testament). It is

1 We will use the abbreviation BFC to refer to the Being a Faithful Church process and the related documents.
2 We will continue to use the word "hermeneutics" in this document. It is the word used by biblical scholarship to talk about the dynamics of reading, interpreting, and applying

the wisdom of scripture to our lives.
3 We will not identify respondents. But the use of quotation marks ["] will indicate where quotations are taken directly from the responses.
4 A more complete compilation of results is available. We will not duplicate that here.

evident that we can learn much from that in our own reading of scripture.⁷

5. It is important to take the entire canon of scripture as our base of operations for healthy hermeneutics. The fact that scripture already interprets scripture compels us to use the whole of scripture in order to better understand each part.
6. Scripture persistently hopes that the letters of its words will become a living word in a world in need of redemption. This does not diminish the authority of scripture, but sharpens it and makes it real in our community and to the world. This pathway indicates that other sources can illuminate what scripture also teaches.
7. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness, and in faithfully understanding scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of the Spirit within and among us. Without this, "the text is just black marks on the paper."
8. Scripture calls us to remember that we are a part of a larger story of "God's love affair with the world." The Gospel's command to go and baptize and the invitation to remember the Lord's Supper are prime examples of when we "do not forget" how God has accompanied us. The yearning to know God is inseparably connected to "remembering" the story of God, a story that we now acknowledge as our own.⁸
9. "Knowing" is inseparable from "doing," "hearing" is inseparable from "acting," and "*praxis* [practice] is indispensable for *gnosis* [knowledge]." Jesus' hermeneutic also repeatedly indicates this critical connection between "works [*erga*] and

faith [*pistis*]." In other words, on a hike we need to walk and not just sit on the path and contemplate the map.

10. Scripture is a "delight" that serves also for devotional refreshment and daily inspiration. The "delight" of scripture is even greater when we can hike together rather than going out on a lone trek.
11. We need to see our interpretive community as larger than the people we can see around us. The hiking trail we are on has already been forged by many who have gone before us.⁹ They have left markers on the trail to help those who come after and we will leave markers for those coming behind us. This does not mean that we can't make the trail better, create short-cuts where advisable, remove obstacles for better mobility, and so on. The interpretive community extends geographically beyond those in our hiking group; it is not restricted to our choice of time and schedule; and it is not constrained by our particular agenda. We must affirm the critical importance of those on the trail with us at this time¹⁰ – those who have gone before, and those who are hiking at the same time, but on trails that may be geographically and culturally distant from us. The awareness of other hikers should not, however, close our eyes to the contextual dangers lurking on *our* hike and the scenic beauty that may highlight something new for us.
12. Jesus is portrayed as "consistently interpreting scripture in reference to, and with regard for the needs/realities of "the least" - the most needy and vulnerable (the poor, the sick, the foreigner/outsider, women, social outcasts...)." God's intention through scripture is to bring wholeness to creation, justice to the orphans and widows, sight and healing to the blind

and the lame, reconciliation and salvation to the sinners.

Ditches to avoid

Each of the paths indicated above inherently hints at a ditch that we would wish to avoid. For example, we enter ditches when Jesus is not a central lens to interpretation, if we ignore context, if we diminish the extent of the canon, etc. We will, therefore, not repeat them all. We will highlight only a few that were specifically identified as potentially problematic ditches.

1. The desire to keep Jesus central to hermeneutics at times leads some to disconnect him from his own scriptural roots (The Hebrew Bible) and his own social/political context in 1st century Palestine. We need to avoid both of these ditches and not leave Jesus without a context.
2. We should avoid the temptation to set the Old Testament aside. The Old Testament is part of our scripture for at least two reasons: i) The New Testament is grounded in Old Testament language, images, quotations, and assumptions and therefore the two Testaments cannot and should not be separated; ii) The Old Testament speaks to things that the New Testament may not highlight. "All of scripture witnesses to God's revelation." "Both Testaments carry a living word of God for us." "Our task is to attempt to discern how all of scripture might function as a word from God to us."
3. We need to avoid proof-texting. "Proof-texting is essentially the use of a text to support or reject a position without giving sufficient attention to the meaning and function of that text in its historical and literary setting in the Bible, and without bringing it into dialogue with other texts particularly relevant to the issue." This

- 5 John Howard Yoder, noted Mennonite theologian, states forcefully what the respondents also point to, namely that the experience with Jesus represents: "... a cosmos shaken by the cross.... a universe being re-ordered by the Word of the resurrection" (J. H. Yoder: *To Hear the Word* 2nd edition; Cascade Books, 2010. p.135). Such a cosmic understanding of Jesus will impact the way scripture is read and understood among God's people.
- 6 We must be aware of all the "contexts" that have touched scripture, including those of choosing and forming scripture, preserving it through the centuries, and translating it.

- 7 This response identified 21 key things about the ways in which Jesus is portrayed as using scripture. These are very helpful. The first thing is that Jesus used scripture a lot, and is described as being creatively and provocatively engaged in conversations about and interpretation of scripture. For example, the respondent identifies up to 25 Old Testament quotations, images, allusions, and echoes in a single chapter of Matthew. This demonstrates that there is already very significant "hermeneutical ferment" in scripture itself.
- 8 One scholar suggests the following four important points: "The Bible has a persistent 'present tense' (it does not only address

- people long ago, but continues to address communities of faith throughout the ages), it functions as a 'witness' to divine revelation, it is linked to human writers, and it is sufficient rather than exhaustive."
- 9 For a brief look at how our responses correspond to key elements of 16th century Anabaptist understandings, please refer to Appendix I.
- 10 Mennonite Church Canada people are a tapestry of cultural and ethnic diversity, regional loyalties, and congregational histories. These are the people hiking together now.

definition highlights the importance of both context and canon for healthy interpretation.

4. We need to avoid generalizations without having immersed ourselves in particular texts. This is the opposite of proof-texting and is equally detrimental to theological discernment. Some of the most common generalizations are: "the Bible says," or "all we need is love," or "let's just focus on justice." Each of these generalizations needs to be understood from particular texts.
5. "We should not assume that our own context is either static or normative when interpreting the Bible." The Apostle Paul says that "now we see in a mirror dimly... now I know only in part." (I Corinthians 13:12). This is an important reminder that we live in a changing context, and our understandings are partial.
6. We should not try to subject God to our ideology. The gift of scripture is that it may challenge rather than support our preferences.

Moving Ahead

The feedback provided above reflects the remarkable promise of the process we have engaged. We are not aware of another effort like this, focusing this agenda via extensive feedback from congregations, individuals, and biblical scholars. As far as we know, this is the first time we have such a helpful and profound articulation of a desired "hermeneutical stance" for the church - articulated by a portion of the priesthood of believers itself.

Is it an exhaustive framework? Clearly, it is not. Scripture is much too profound to be contained in one such effort.

Is it adequate for us as a church now? It is never adequate in any final sense of the word, but it could be an agreed upon path on our hike, and that would already be very helpful.

Whether this path is desirable and possible is the question that we will need to test with congregations and delegates.

What are the benefits of accepting this framework as an adequate path for us? Allow us to suggest a few:

The need for common ground can hardly be overstated.

We have common ground upon which we could further discuss, agree, disagree, and discern how this commonness applies to particular discernment.

7. The need for transparency is urgent.

We would be transparent about our assumptions, and we could explain better on what basis we arrive at given interpretations, directions, and decisions.

8. Increased awareness is healthy.

Transparency and awareness would alleviate the sensation we feel at times that different parts of our body function as "ships passing in the night" (i.e., unaware of each others' presence and unappreciative of each others' sincere efforts to be faithful).

9. The need for accountability is critical.

We could better hold each other accountable to interpretive processes, even while it would not guarantee interpretive consensus.

10. The value of acknowledging and affirming our body as an interpretive community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is important and timely.

We would take seriously the way in which the Holy Spirit has led and is leading our church as a body of believers.

11. The need for teaching in our church is essential.

This "hermeneutical stance" could become a teaching preference for the church. It would help us to engage church members – new and old church leaders – new and old pastors – new and old.

12. The ongoing and careful nurture of our vocation as a body of discernment is vital.

It is a seed that could grow, be refined, and become even more useful.

Scripture itself points to the need for the Body of Christ to be an accountable hermeneutic community. These words of scripture may make us squirm, but they are poignant and fresh:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. - Ephesians 4:11-16

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. - Hebrews 5:12-14

Primary Writer:

Robert J. Suderman

Processed and approved by:

BFC Task Force and Mennonite Church Canada

General Board

April, 2012

Delegate Assembly Actions:

We recommend acceptance of the following statements of affirmation and action:

1. We acknowledge with gratitude the counsel received from congregations, groups, scholars, and individuals of our body. We receive this summary report as a sign of the Holy Spirit's work among us, and will use this emerging framework in future efforts to interpret scripture together for our faith and life.
2. We recommend that in the next 12 months (July/2012 – July/2013) each area church of Mennonite Church Canada organize opportunities to explore, deepen, and strengthen our understandings of each of the "paths and ditches" identified in this summary report. We further suggest that some common resources generated and/or identified by Mennonite Church Canada be used.
3. We recommend that congregations process this document carefully. We further recommend that congregations highlight particular questions or issues they are facing that could benefit by using this framework of scriptural discernment.

Appendix I

A Quick Look Back:

Path #11 above suggests that we need to be aware of other hikers. How do the paths and ditches identified from the responses compare with others who have gone before? Specifically, how do they compare with the Anabaptist forbears of the 16th century? These are important questions, but it is not within the scope of this document to answer them fully. That would be a substantive study for which many resources are already available.

Stuart Murray, for example, identifies six hermeneutical principles essential in 16th century Anabaptists.¹¹ These are: The Bible as Self-interpreting, Christocentrism, The Two Testaments, Spirit and Word, Congregational Hermeneutics, Hermeneutics of Obedience. We cannot investigate these here in detail, but it is remarkable how closely these resemble the paths outlined above. It is also noteworthy how the early Anabaptists struggled with some of the same ditches that our responses highlighted.

We can point to some of the overarching, key ingredients of 16th century Anabaptist understandings of scripture and hermeneutics to taste a bit of what we would find in a more intensive study. We turn to that briefly now.

1. Some 16th century Anabaptists understood scripture to be the most authoritative source for Christian faith and life. Indeed, they borrowed from other reformers the idea of *sola scriptura* to indicate that other sources that claimed to be authoritative really were not. Their passion, however, was not so much to keep *scriptura* pure, but to maintain the faithfulness and obedience of the church connected to God's revelation in scripture. We see a similar emphasis in the "paths" indicated above.
2. Some Anabaptists, however, had an interesting sense of the "living word," or the "inner word" that could be present quite apart from scripture - indeed, that needed to be present apart from scripture in order to fully understand scripture. This understanding did not eliminate the sense of *sola scriptura* but relativized it slightly. However, John H. Yoder indicates that even in these cases: "the only court of appeal is the text of Scripture. No congregation and no prophet may claim with any authority to have heard the Spirit, unless in the testing of that Spirit scripture can be appealed to."¹² We see a similar emphasis in the "paths" indicated above in our yearning for the Spirit to show us God's will also beyond scripture.
3. One of the primary distinctions of the 16th century Anabaptists was their sense that the authority of scripture was best understood in the context of the hermeneutic community. Again, this was due not only, or even primarily, to their desire to protect scripture, but because of their passion for seeing the Church as the agent of God for the restoration of creation. We see a similar emphasis in the "paths" indicated above.
4. The Anabaptists had a strong sense that Jesus was the interpretive key to understanding all of scripture. We can see a similar emphasis in the paths indicated above.
5. The Anabaptists believed in the importance of the Holy Spirit to guide the hermeneutic community in its understanding of faithfulness according to scripture. We see this emphasis in the "paths" as well.
6. The Anabaptists were well known for their insistence that understanding and obeying scripture were integrally linked. It was unfathomable that either could be possible without the other. This hermeneutic of obedience is also very evident in the "paths" outlined above.
7. One of the remarkable things about the early Anabaptists was that simple, often uneducated folk articulated their faith in compelling ways even on the road to martyrdom. This sense that ordinary people, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and without the mediation of the hierarchy of the church, can understand enough to be faithful was a key conviction of the Anabaptists. We note in our respondents the desire to integrate the contribution of the scholars with the wisdom of the members in the churches.

This is a very brief summary. Certainly, it does not do justice to the dynamics of 16th century Anabaptist hermeneutics. It is enough to indicate that the paths suggested by our responses correspond closely to those of our hermeneutical ancestors.

11 Murray, Stuart, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000).

12 J. H. Yoder: *To Hear the Word* 2nd edition; Cascade Books, 2010, pp.135, 227.

Mennonite Church Canada Congregations and Area Churches

Re: Being a Faithful Church 4.1 (attached)

September, 2012

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

On July 14, at the 2012 Assembly in Vancouver, Mennonite Church Canada delegates overwhelmingly affirmed the following three recommendations concerning the Being a Faithful Church 4 process (complete document attached¹):

1. We acknowledge with gratitude the counsel received from congregations, groups, scholars, and individuals of our body. We receive this summary report as a sign of the Holy Spirit's work among us, and will use this emerging framework in future efforts to interpret scripture together for our faith and life.
2. We recommend that in the next 12 months (July/2012 – July/2013) each area church of Mennonite Church Canada organize opportunities to explore, deepen, and strengthen our understandings of each of the "paths and ditches" identified in this summary report. We further suggest that some common resources generated and/or identified by Mennonite Church Canada be used.
3. We recommend that congregations process this document carefully. We further recommend that congregations highlight particular questions or issues they are facing that could benefit by using this framework of scriptural discernment.

As promised in the recommendations above and in keeping with the timetable for the Being a Faithful Church process presented at the Vancouver Assembly (www.resources.mennonitechurch.ca/ResourceView/5/14372), we are now sending to you a resource whereby you can continue to participate in the follow-up to these recommendations. Other resources will be added to support each phase of the BFC process as outlined in the timetable. Please set aside three to four hours (or more) during the fall of 2012 to work with these materials in your congregation.

1 Being a Faithful Church 4: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment: Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways

Please note that this instrument requests that you respond to the BFC Task Force in three important ways (by January 31/2013):

Please do the suggested exercise as outlined below in the instrument document and then respond in these ways:

- 1) On the basis of your work, share with the BFC Task Force your suggestions for ways to strengthen the document.
- 2) Highlight other particular questions or issues that you are facing as a church which could be clarified by using this framework of scriptural discernment.
- 3) Please share with the BFC Task Force one or two priority questions/concerns regarding sexuality that you want Mennonite Church Canada, as a national Body, to begin to process.

Thank you to all who have already participated in this process of equipping the church to discern scripture and God's leading on difficult matters. If you have not yet participated, we urge you to get involved now.

In the first three Being a Faithful Church papers (March 2009, July 2010, and July 2011), a core understanding is that this is a spiritual exercise and that we will engage seriously the spiritual disciplines as taught to us by our Lord. Such a process needs to be steeped in prayer for each other, studying scripture together, fasting, worship, listening, celebration, discernment, conversation, and commitment to learn.

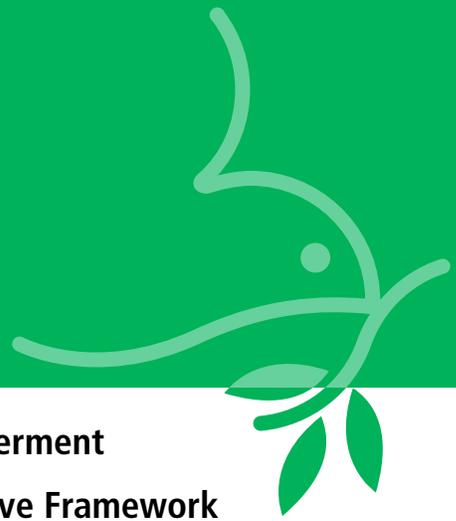
The instrument is provided below. Please review it carefully and find ways to engage it fully in the life of your congregation.

May God's Spirit strengthen you and give you joy,

Willard Metzger,
Executive Director, Mennonite Church Canada

On behalf of the Being a Faithful Church Task Force:

Andrew Reesor McDowell
Hilda A. Hildebrandt
Laura Loewen
Robert J. Suderman
Rudy Baergen



Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment

Exercising our Interpreting Muscles: Testing our Interpretive Framework

Introduction and Background:

In 2011 we asked Mennonite Church Canada congregations, individuals, and scholars to be teachers to each other. The teaching question was:

What elements have you found useful in interpreting the Bible for faith and life?

Many – but not all – responded. The Being a Faithful Church Task Force compiled your teaching into a document that we called (in part) “*Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways*.” (see www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1816). This document was presented to and discussed by delegates at the Vancouver Assembly 2012.

It is a remarkable document, identifying 12 helpful “paths” and 6 unhelpful “ditches” in interpreting the Bible. The delegates in Vancouver approved a recommendation that said (in part):

- a) We receive this summary report as a sign of the Holy Spirit’s work among us, and will use this emerging framework in future efforts to interpret Scripture together for our faith and life.
- b) . . . congregations process this document carefully.
- c) . . . congregations highlight particular questions or issues they are facing that could benefit by using this framework of scriptural discernment.

Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways: Listening to Each other:

Different starting points in our Bible interpretation lead us to different end results. For example, if we give priority to the voice of Jesus as the key to discerning the use of violence, we will end up at a different place than if we give priority to certain texts or voices from the Old Testament. The BFC 4 document makes us more aware of the starting points that we should all take seriously. The document identifies these as “paths.” It also points to starting points that we should avoid. These are called “ditches.”

We now want to listen carefully to what has been taught, thereby learning from each other.

To Begin:

- 1) Path #7 helpfully reminds us that: “It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness, and in faithfully understanding Scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of

the Spirit within and among us. Without this, ‘the text is just black marks on the paper.’” As we begin another process of learning, listening, and responding, let us invite the Holy Spirit to be our host, our guide, our strength, and our companion. Let us pray that God’s Spirit will make our spirits attentive to the will of God revealed to us through Scripture. In the same way that the Spirit was present at every step in creating the gift of Scripture, let us pray that the Spirit will now help us understand what is there and what it means for our lives of faithfulness today.

- 2) Make sure that members of your congregation have access to the BFC 4 document approved in the Vancouver Assembly 2012, available at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1816.

To Continue: Suggested Exercise:

We are asking that you engage together in an exercise of biblical interpretation. You are free to choose whatever question/concern would be most helpful to you.

- a) Sometimes it is helpful to explore a question that is not a “front-burner” issue for us, e.g., the Church’s support for slavery (USA) or apartheid (South Africa). It allows us then to work more deliberately with the way the Bible was used and, perhaps, misused.
- b) For others, it may be more helpful to choose an issue that is still within easy memory of our church experience but which may not be as immediate as it was a short time ago, e.g., the role of women in the leadership of the church; the church’s response to divorce and re-marriage.
- c) For still others, you may wish to tackle a question that is very current and on the actual agenda of the church now, e.g., participation in the Lord’s Supper; co-habitation of church members; assisted suicide.

Whatever question/concern you choose, we want to encourage you to “test” the “paths” and “ditches” of the BFC 4 document to understand how these might have been (or are now) useful.

To help you get started, we are providing a brief sketch of two situations: the use of the Bible to support slavery in the USA, and its use to support Apartheid in South Africa. If you choose another theme, please also begin by understanding the way the Bible has been used in the question you are addressing.

This is the way it would work:

- a) As mentioned above, begin, end, and clothe your study in prayer.
- b) Examine the way the Bible was used in the question chosen (two cases are provided below).
- c) Apply each of the 12 “paths” to the interpretations by asking questions such as
 - Path #1: How is Jesus the key to interpretation?
 - Path #2: How are the contexts (biblical, historical, and contemporary) taken seriously?
 - Path #3: How do other parts of Scripture speak to the issue under investigation?
 - Path #4: How does Jesus use the Old Testament to speak to the question under consideration?
 - Path #5: Are there parts of the canon of Scripture that are not given sufficient attention and that could offer wisdom on the question?
 - Path #6: Should the cruelty of slavery and apartheid (in the cases below) have pointed to a need to re-examine the interpretation of the Bible that was used to justify them?
 - Path #7: How do we intentionally invite the Holy Spirit into our discernment?
 - Path #8: How might remembering the Exodus and the teachings about jubilee have helped the interpretations of slavery and apartheid?
 - Path #9: What difference does it make when experiences and biblical analysis (or interpretation) are allowed to impact each other?
 - Path #10: Is Scripture a “delight” for us as we interpret it and for those impacted by our interpretations?
 - Path #11: How do/did interpretations take seriously what others had said before and are/were saying?
 - Path #12: Does the interpretation pay special attention to the “least of these” as is the case in Jesus’ interpretation of Scripture in his time?
 - Ditches: How does the interpretation avoid the ditches identified in the BFC 4 document?
- d) Would consideration of these “paths” and “ditches” have led to different outcomes? How? Why? Or why not?

Please send your responses, to;

c/o BFC Task Force, Willard Metzger, Executive Director, Mennonite Church Canada, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg MB, R3P 0M4 or email to: wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca

1 These case studies come from a South African scholar’s article “*Being Biblical? Slavery, sexuality, and the inclusive community*,” Richard A Burrige; Kings College, University of London (UK), 2007. (Note: Burrige uses the word “inclusive” to mean that all voices in the community have an opportunity to participate. It is not referring to a pre-determined outcome of the discernment).

Two Case Studies:¹

- A. The biblical interpretations used to support slavery in the USA often included the following:
 - a) Genesis 9:22-27: Noah decrees that, as punishment for seeing him naked, Ham’s descendants will be slaves for Shem and Japheth.
 - b) Genesis 24:35; 12:5; 14:14; 20:14: Abraham is blessed by God with male and female slaves as a wealthy slave-owner.
 - c) Genesis 26:12-14: Slaves were part of Abraham’s estate as property he passed on to his son Isaac.
 - d) Exodus 21; Leviticus 25: There is provision in the laws of Moses for the Israelites to buy and sell slaves, and how to treat them.
 - e) Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-19: Slaves are told to obey their masters with enthusiasm as though obeying Christ.
 - f) Philemon 12; I Corinthians 7:20-24: Paul returns the runaway slave Onesimus to his master Philemon, and tells slaves who hear his epistles to remain in the condition in which they were called.
 - g) 1 Timothy 6:1-6: Paul instructs all who are under the yoke of slavery to regard their masters as worthy of all honour.
 - h) Romans 13:1-7: The appeal to proper law and order was understood as advising that things should stay the same as they were.
- B. The biblical interpretations used to support apartheid in South Africa often included the following:
 - a) Genesis 1:28: God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply” included the separation of the diversity of peoples.
 - b) Deuteronomy 32:8-9: “fixed the boundaries of the territories” chosen by God;
 - c) Acts 17:26-27: “[God] allotted ... the boundaries of the places where they (the nations – *ethnos*) would live.
 - d) Acts 2:6-11: Pentecost produced the principle of everyone hearing “God’s great deeds in our own language” – and this justified separate racial churches, according to language groups: an Afrikaans church, an English church, Xhosa, Zulu and so forth.
 - e) The Exodus story was persistently used to describe the amazing taking of the land in South Africa by the Afrikaner, who understood themselves to be God’s chosen people of the Promised Land.
 - f) Galatians 3:28: The unity of slave and free, male and female, Gentile and Jew was seen as a “spiritual” unity, which continued to underline the need for physical separation.
 - h) Romans 13:1-7: Paul insisted on obedience to the laws of God and of human beings, with the state as the agent of God.

Primary Writer:
Robert J. Suderman

Processed and approved by:
BFC Task Force and Mennonite Church Canada General Board

September, 2012



Being a Faithful Church: Twelve Paths of Biblical Interpretation

Introduction

Too often, Christians use scripture in unhelpful ways to advance a particular point of view. As Mennonite Church Canada we want to honour Scripture and use it with integrity.

Since 2009, Mennonite Church Canada has been on a journey of better learning the heart of God by strengthening our grasp of scripture for our time. The most recent leg in this journey took place at the July 2012 Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, where delegates approved Being a Faithful Church 4 (BFC4) for study by congregations, Area Churches, groups and individuals. BFC4 summarized the feedback received from congregations, scholars and individuals to the Scripture and Discernment Tool of October, 2011. BFC4 uses the metaphor of a hike, identifying 12 paths and 6 ditches of Biblical Interpretation. In September, 2012, an additional study tool was sent out to congregations and Area Churches to help guide the process. To further stimulate thought and discussion, the BFC Task Force is preparing a series of articles on each of the 12 paths of the Biblical interpretation hike.

If the BFC process is new to you and/or your congregation, you will find it helpful to review the progress that has led us to this point. Visit www.mennonitechurch.ca and follow the "Being a Faithful Church" links.

Path 1: How is Jesus the key to interpretation?

"The life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus are central and serve as the critical lens of interpretation that helps us understand all of Scripture."

Through the centuries Mennonites have been guided by Menno Simon's Christ-centred foundation for Scriptural interpretation and ethical discernment. The verse "For no other foundation can be laid, than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 3:11) often found inscribed on the title pages of Menno's writings, gives focus to this conviction. It was no surprise then that when congregations and individuals were asked about the assumptions, principles, and guidelines that are helpful in the interpretation of the Bible, they pointed again and again to the centrality of Jesus. We highly value all Scripture but want to interpret it through the lens of Jesus Christ.

In responding to the tool that led to the formation of BFC4, one congregation wrote that "We must seek interpretations that mirror Christ himself." Another suggested that the early Anabaptists, perhaps more so than other Christians of their day, clung stubbornly to the life and teaching of Jesus, culminating in his death and resurrection, as the lens by which to interpret the rest of the Bible. In his context, Menno

Simons insisted that all prophecy had to be tested by Christ, and that Christians needed to look to what Christ had taught about warfare, violence, and vengeance. "If Christ fights his enemies with the sword of his mouth, if he smites the earth with the rod of his mouth, and slays the wicked with the breath of his lips; and if we are to be conformed to his image, how can we, then, oppose our enemies with any other sword?"

One respondent cautioned against disconnecting Jesus from his own Scriptural roots. BFC4 names that tendency as one the 'ditches' that we want to avoid. We can't understand who Jesus was, his teachings and life choices apart from the Old Testament. Even so, God's Son is the focal point for our salvation, for our ethical discernment and our understanding of God's purposes in creation. In the words of Hebrews 1:1-2, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." What difference does it make in our interpretation of Scripture if we hold Jesus in the centre?

Rudy Baergen
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 2: Context makes a difference

"Context makes a difference in how Scripture is interpreted, understood, and applied for faith and life. Context refers not only to the importance of understanding the time and place out of which Scripture emerged and to which it was addressed. It also refers to our time and place and how that impacts our understandings of Scripture."

In the weeks leading up to the 2012 American election, Barak Obama and Mitt Romney both protested that their comments were taken out of context. Words are given meaning by their context, both by the one in which they are spoken and the one in which they are heard. When a taxicab driver in Bogota, Colombia, where there are no seasons says, "we are having winter today" it means something quite different than when we say it in Canada!

By context we can refer to the whole conversation, its spirit and intent. Or to the broader things like historical and cultural environment which give life to a story, a teaching or a value.

When we study Scripture we must also be respectful of context. The words of Jesus in Luke 22:36, "And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one," are not calling Canadian Christians to trade in

their winter coat for a sword! We can't understand these strange words without looking into the context, which includes Jesus disallowing use of the sword by his disciples to protect him (22:49-50). Spoken and written words of Scripture belong to sentences, conversations, paragraphs and even a selected collection of books, all of which give shape to the particular meaning. Words spoken in one historical, cultural context will not necessarily allow for a simple application in another. And the blinders of our own context may make it difficult for us to hear the word of Scripture, as in the story of Lazarus and the rich man. What does it mean for us to remember the Sabbath in our post-Christendom time? How do we understand Paul's prohibiting women to speak in church (I Cor 14:34) given our own sociological context? What is the role of context when we consider the first Century tendency to merge mental illness with demon possession?

While we believe that God's Word transcends time and culture we also know that our human language and concepts, as well as our scientific and political world views, are shaped by our context. Context is the water that we swim in. God's Word waits to be transposed from its Scriptural context to the one in which we move, live and have our being.

Rudy Baergen
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Taskforce

Path 3: Scripture already interprets scripture

"Scripture already interprets Scripture. It is very important to pay close attention to this inter-textual interpretation, because this already gives us essential clues in the ways we need to understand how various passages relate to each other."

This is wise counsel. It recognizes that the Bible is not a "flat" book. Each verse and story gains meaning in relationship to other verses and stories. The church, in its wisdom, has collected a "canon" of literature that all together has been understood to be an authoritative source for Christian faith and life. This means that it behooves us to be alert to the ways in which different parts of Scripture relate to each other.

Many examples could be given. One is the appropriate understanding and the proper use of power as God's people relate to each other and to the world. This concern relates to family, marriage, community, and nation. Multiple voices speak to this concern; sometimes they nuance what other voices have said before them. This has raised the questions related to the use or rejection of violence in the life of discipleship. It has also raised questions about the best way to structure and organize the life of the church. Another example is the concern about inclusion and exclusion in the life of God's people. Whereas Deuteronomy 23:3 teaches that "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord," Matthew includes the Moabite Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.

What makes these scriptural connections even more interesting and complex, is that it is not simply a matter of chronology, i.e., the last voice is not necessarily the definitive voice. If that were the case, we could simply do away with the Old Testament, or the letters of Paul. But this is not necessarily the case and, again, it behooves the Christian community to be alert to the mind of God as revealed in Scripture.

For some, these inter-textual relationships may seem daunting and frustrating, and might prefer something simpler. But God, through the

Holy Spirit, has determined that this kind of Scripture is best for us. It is a record of God's presence with God's people and the world. Both the good and the bad are included, as unsavoury as it may seem to us at times. Scripture does not avoid the realities we experience. It does provide counsel and wisdom to be faithful within our realities as it did to the people of old. God blesses our capacity for discernment and it is an honour to be part of God's people gifted in this way.

Robert J. Suderman
for the Being a Faithful Church Taskforce

Path 4: How does Jesus use the Old Testament to speak to the question under consideration?

"Jesus also interprets Scripture. One response focused exclusively on trying to understand the 'hermeneutics of Jesus,' i.e., how the Gospel writers portray the way Jesus uses and interprets the Old Testament. It is evident that we can learn much from that in our own reading of Scripture."

At Hagerman Mennonite Church, the adult Sunday School Class is working through the BFC4 paper on the paths and ditches of Biblical Interpretation. In the discussion of how Jesus interprets what we know as the Old Testament, (Path #4), Pastor Gary Harder drew attention to the Isaiah 61 passage verses 1 and 2, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."

We then compared this with what Jesus says in the Luke 4:18 passage. We saw that Jesus leaves out the phrase "... and the day of vengeance of our God."

Gary went further and pointed out that at the same synagogue service in Nazareth (verses 25-30), Jesus tells two stories. First Jesus says that in the day of Elijah there were many widows, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there was a great famine over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none (of these widows) but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Second, there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha and none of them was cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian. These two stories were deeply offensive to those listening. In the Luke account, Jesus takes the Isaiah message of preaching the good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and setting at liberty those who are oppressed, and he gives to it a new and expanded interpretation which now draws the Gentiles into the story.

In another example is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), where Jesus speaks not of abolishing the law or the prophets but of fulfilling them. Then he declares: "You have heard it said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you..." In so doing he finds the heart of the Scripture and he gives it a new life-giving interpretation.

Having a good understanding of how Jesus uses and interprets Old Testament Scripture will strengthen our overall capacity to understand God's purposes over time.

Andrew Reesor McDowell
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 5: Consider the entire canon of scripture

"It is important to take the entire canon of Scripture as our base of operations for healthy hermeneutics. The fact that Scripture already interprets Scripture compels us to use the whole of Scripture in order to better understand each part."

Douglas B. Miller is the writer of the *Ecclesiastes* (the Believers Church Bible Commentary). Miller writes in the introduction that the basic theme of *Ecclesiastes* is that "... life brings the unexpected, the tragic, and the confusing - and (readers) have found in the author a trustworthy companion for walking through such experiences." *Ecclesiastes* "... may be the most personal book of the Bible, revealing the author's frustrations, indignation and reflections on mystery"

On page 244 of the commentary, Miller nicely outlines how *Ecclesiastes* "reflects a contentious conversation with traditional wisdom," and gives the following examples.

- Proverbs makes high claims for wisdom, something worth the discipline necessary to attain while (*Ecclesiastes*) emphasizes the limits and pain of wisdom which can never guarantee safety, success or the respect of others;
- Proverbs praises diligence while (*Ecclesiastes*) emphasizes the hardship and futility of toil;
- Proverbs anticipates a glorious life for the wise and righteous and destruction for the fool and wicked while (*Ecclesiastes*) insists that all people die regardless of their character and that the wicked sometimes thrive;
- Proverbs stresses the importance of timeliness and is particularly confident that those who speak wisely will achieve success or bless others whereas (*Ecclesiastes*) questions whether discerning the appropriate moment give humans an advantage and is sensitive to the limits of speech.
- Proverbs and Psalms had a creed that the wise and righteous live on through the memory of others though the wicked are forgotten whereas (*Ecclesiastes*) insists that the dead are not longer remembered.

By taking the entire canon of Scripture in Biblical interpretation we can benefit by the conversations that happen among the writers of what has been called the 'Wisdom literature' of the Old Testament (e.g. Psalms, Proverbs, Job and *Ecclesiastes*). In addition to listening in on the conversation among the wisdom writers we then include what the New Testament writers say regarding the difficult questions of life and see for example in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and how he trusted God in spite of pain, humiliation and lack of immediate success in this life.

Listening in on these conversations and then making application to our lives as congregations and individuals is an exciting and awesome task.

Andrew Reesor McDowell
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 6: Scripture is a living word

"Scripture persistently hopes that the letters of its words will become a living word in a world in need of redemption. This does not diminish the authority of Scripture, but sharpens it and makes it real in our community and to the world. This pathway indicates that other sources can illuminate what Scripture also teaches."

This pathway wants to teach us that Scripture is not a fossilized, time constrained library of ancient literature. It's not a quaint museum piece which tells us how things used to be or how people used to think. Rather, we believe it contains the living Word of God which through God's Spirit brings new life to humans wherever they find themselves. Sometimes the new listeners can easily apply its stories or teachings. The parable of the Good Samaritan in any setting readily finds new characters that re-enact the roles of the ill-fated traveller, the robber, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan. In other cases a story in Scripture speaks in ways that the author could never have foreseen, as in the story of King Ahab's appropriation of Naboth's vineyard. Ahab's action becomes a prophetic word against speculation in our capitalistic economy. Or when Jesus' exception clause allowing for divorce and remarriage in some situations (Matthew 19:9) might give other new insight on how to deal in a redemptive way with divorce and remarriage in the 21st century. Whenever Jesus clarifies the law with his pronouncement "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you" he does not negate or diminish the authority of the law, but he goes to the heart of its intent and brings it to life in his own setting. Amazingly, Jesus, in turn, gives the task of sharpening the authority of the scripture to his disciples: "Again, truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

The stories and teachings of Scripture, while offered in a pre-scientific age, continue to reveal and guide in an age where humans now know that the earth is round and circles the sun. Scripture's insistence on the sanctity of life continues to be authoritative even in a time of accessible abortion and difficult questions around the end of life. New sources of information from scientific research, the social sciences, medical studies, etc. will not negate the authority of Scripture but can help us to sharpen the intent of Scripture and make wise applications.

Rudy Baergen
co-chair, Being a Faithful Church Taskforce

Path 7: Holy Spirit Guides

"It is the Holy Spirit who guides the interpretive community in faithfulness, and in faithfully understanding Scripture for our lives. This means that we must continually open our hearts and minds to the work of the Spirit within and among us. Without this, the text is just black marks on the paper."

I'm glad the congregational responses to our invitation for feedback on the BFC process identified the work of the Spirit in the hermeneutic community as an important key to using the Bible well.

A story comes to mind. As General Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada in 2006, I led the *God's People Now* tour during which I personally visited virtually every one of the 225 congregations across Mennonite Church Canada. One congregation pushed the question of where "hermeneutical authority" lies in Mennonite Church Canada. This congregation had recently revamped its leadership structure so that the pastor was the authority for biblical interpretation in the community, and the role of the community was to obey the discernment of the pastor. I responded by saying that our understanding is that there are three essential ingredients to interpretive authority:

- a) Scripture is open before us;

- b) A reading and interpreting community gathered around open Scripture with the gifts that the Spirit has given it;
- c) The Holy Spirit guiding our discernment.

This response generated much dis-ease in that congregation. They responded by saying that if interpretive authority cannot be focused in one person, effectively it means that “there is no authority at all.”

Path #7 reiterates an understanding of the authority of the Spirit-guided community in scriptural discernment. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* underlines this perspective. It states:

The Bible is the essential book of the church. Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guides the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship... We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.

While some Christian groups may prefer to give more authority either to a Pope, a Presbytery, the Clergy, a Learned Seminary, or the Elders, this path suggests that we need to look to the discerning wisdom of the gathered community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Robert J. Suderman
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 8: Scripture calls us to remember that we are a part of a larger story of “God’s love affair with the world.”

“Scripture calls us to remember that we are a part of a larger story of God’s love affair with the world. The Gospel’s command to go and baptize and the invitation to remember the Lord’s Supper are prime examples of when we “do not forget” how God has accompanied us. The yearning to know God is inseparably connected to remembering the story of God, a story that we now acknowledge as our own.”

This is a path that is particularly missional in focus. The missional church discerns the activity of God and then aligns itself to that activity. Although the church is God’s premier vehicle for restoration and reconciliation, God’s activity is not limited to the church. God’s passion to restore a world in need of healing and hope is always active.

Scripture describes how God has been active in the past – from the creation narrative in Genesis to God’s redemptive initiative in the Gospels. Jesus also promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to help the community of faith remain active in God’s redemptive activity.

It is exciting to be reminded that we are part of God’s larger intent. When our efforts are aligned to God’s activity we become an integral ingredient of God’s responsive recipe. From the wellbeing of the earth to the health of our relationship with God and one another, we become active participants of the continuing story of God’s love.

Scripture invites us not only to experience God’s love for ourselves but also to be an expression of God’s love for the world.

Willard Metzger
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 9: Knowing, Hearing, Acting, and Practice

“Knowing is inseparable from doing, hearing is inseparable from acting, and praxis [practice] is indispensable for gnosis [knowledge]. Jesus’ hermeneutic also repeatedly indicates this critical connection between works [erga] and faith [pistis]. In other words, on a hike we need to walk and not just sit on the path and contemplate the map.”

Discernment can be intellectually active but remain practically passive. We can determine what a correct course of action may be, but until we activate that action, practical impact will not be realized. It is important to actively display the impact of our discernment.

This summer I witnessed the ceremony of the first woman to be ordained within the fellowship of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo (CEM). In conversation with CEM President Benjamin Mubenga, I applauded this historical event. He responded by reminding me that the decision to ordain women had been processed several years earlier. However, this was the first woman to actualize a much earlier decision. It could be argued that the decision had not become real until this ordination.

Discernment can also be participatory. As we exercise our pursuit of faithfulness we may acquire a better understanding of what God requires of us. The understanding of faith for many in Scripture was not fully understood until it was accompanied by action. The disciples expressed and experienced faith as they began to pass out the small portions of food to feed the thousands (Matt. 14). They did not understand how the crowd of people would be fed until they began to distribute the food.

We too are invited to be transformed by faith as we proceed in faithful obedience. The full understanding of how God will work may not be fully comprehended until we are in the process of acting on that which is discerned to be faithful activity.

Willard Metzger
Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 10: Delight in Scripture

“Scripture is a delight that serves also for devotional refreshment and daily inspiration. The delight of Scripture is even greater when we can hike together rather than going out on a lone trek.”

When reading a letter from a lover or a beloved friend, the experience is more than an intellectual exercise of reading words. The letter contains deep relational meaning. It ignites emotions of endearment – both towards the author of the letter and from the author of the letter. Because of this, such a letter is often reread several times.

God’s people are especially nurtured by Scripture. Like a cherished letter, reading Scripture is a relational experience. It contains words of the One we love and cherish. It describes sacrificial love for us. Reading and studying Scripture is more than an intellectual exercise. It is a deep communication of the soul. Because of this, any process that draws us to study Scripture is welcomed by God’s People. The psalmist reflects this engagement well in Psalm 119, especially vs 97-104.

One of the benefits of a letter from a lover or a beloved friend is that it reminds us we are not alone. We are cherished and valued by another. The community of God’s people also supplies this. It counters the loneliness of isolation and provides a context of mutual support. It is

often through the embrace of others that we more fully understand the embrace of God.

To study Scripture together as a community of faith provides the fullest experience of what God intended. First, we hear and reflect on the words expressing God's affection and love. And then secondly, we experience God's love through one another. This provides a much fuller experience of the relational character of Scripture than reading it in isolation.

Willard Metzger

Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 11: Many Gone Before Us

Path 11: "We need to see our interpretive community as larger than the people we can see around us. The hiking trail we are on has already been forged by many who have gone before us. They have left markers on the trail to help those who come after . . . (T)he interpretive community extends geographically beyond those in our hiking group; it is not restricted to our hiking group; it is not restricted to our choice of time and schedule; and it is not constrained by our particular agenda. We must affirm the critical importance of those on the trail with us at this time, those who have gone before, and those who are hiking at the same time, but on trails that may be geographically and culturally distant from us. . . ."

This path teaches us that there are others on our hike who interpret Scripture very differently from how we might.

One of the most passionate cross-cultural debates in our Scriptures is found in Acts 15. For a people who had been commanded that male circumcision was a non-negotiable sign of one's commitment and obedience to God (Gen. 17:10, Exodus 12: 43f; Joshua 5;), and who had obeyed that commandment for centuries, it was unthinkable that the law of Moses could be broken. Salvation came through obedience to the law (Acts 15:1). After considerable debate among the apostles and elders, Peter acknowledged to those gathered that God's Spirit was at work in the lives of the new folks on the hiking trail, the gentiles, and that circumcision was not central to salvation. God's act of salvation was an act of grace, and it extended beyond the Jewish race.

The example of slavery is an illustration of a discussion that took centuries to bring us to where we are today in our interpretation. We have abolished slavery, and in those instances where child slavery or the enslavement of women for the benefit of the sex trade takes place, we believe that a terrible wrong has occurred. In our scriptures, slaves are told to obey their masters with enthusiasm as though obeying Christ (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22-25, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18 – 19).

There are other Biblical texts that support the practice of slavery. And yet, there are also texts which suggest that as followers of Jesus, slaves were to be treated more as brothers and sisters than as property one owned (Philemon 1:8f). In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that all believers are children of God. There is no differentiation between Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (Gal. 3:25-29). While Paul's context can be seen as maintaining the status quo regarding slavery, we also note that a shift in the relationship between owner and slave is beginning to emerge. As Anabaptists, the life and teachings of Jesus are central in our discernment and therefore the commandment "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you . . ." (Matt. 7:12) already suggests a

world view where there is no master/slave relationship.

Laura Loewen

Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force

Path 12: Law of Grace and Justice

"Jesus is portrayed as "consistently interpreting Scripture in reference to, and with regard for the needs/realities of 'the least' – the most needy and vulnerable (the poor, the sick, the foreigner/outsider, women, social outcasts)." God's intention through Scripture is to bring wholeness to creation, justice to the orphans and widows, sight and healing to the blind and the lame, reconciliation and salvation to the sinners."

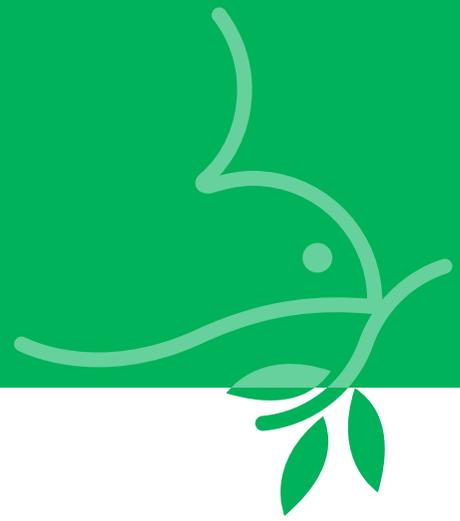
There are many examples given in the gospel writings where Jesus follows a law of grace and justice rather than the legalities of the law as practiced by the Pharisees. For example, healing on the Sabbath was considered as breaking the law (Ex. 20). And yet, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6), as well as a crippled woman (Luke 13:10f) on the Sabbath. His response when he was criticized for his actions was that observing the Sabbath was not intended to keep us from doing good.

On another occasion a woman, who was caught in adultery, was brought to Jesus as way of entrapping him (John 8). According to the law this woman should have been put to death (Lev. 20:10). In fact, the Scribes and Pharisees quoted this law to Jesus in front of the crowd. But Jesus saw the hypocrisy in this action and challenged those who had not sinned to throw the first stone. Jesus would also have noted that only the woman was brought before him. Where was her partner? To the woman, the person with the least power in that particular setting, Jesus' challenge was to go and sin no more. Jesus did not condone her action, but neither did he choose to condemn her. He chose the path of grace.

As we discern our responses in difficult relational situations, a good foundational scripture text is the Great Commandment as found in Matthew 22: 37-40 which calls us to ". . . love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Laura Loewen

Member of Being a Faithful Church Task Force



**Between Horizons:
Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality**

By Rudy Baergen and Robert J. Suderman, with Study Guide by Willard Metzger

Table of Contents

Preface BFC 5:2

Introduction BFC 5:3

Chapter One: The Link between Sexuality and Spirituality: Covenantal Relationships BFC 5:4
 Summary points..... BFC 5:4

Chapter Two: Perspectives from the Garden of Delight..... BFC 5:5
 Summary points..... BFC 5:6

Chapter Three: Broken Links BFC 5:7
 Summary points..... BFC 5:7

Chapter Four: Redesigning the Garden as We Journey Toward the New City..... BFC 5:8
 Perspectives from the Old Testament BFC 5:8
 Perspectives from the New Testament..... BFC 5:9
 Jesus' views on sexuality and covenant..... BFC 5:9
 Paul and the image of marriage..... BFC 5:9
 Nothing is impossible with God BFC 5:10
 Summary points..... BFC 5:10

Conclusion..... BFC 5:11

Appendix: The Power of Context BFC 5:12

Study Guide

Introduction BFC 5:13

Lesson One: Imperfect Sexuality..... BFC 5:14

Lesson Two: Private Ownership..... BFC 5:15

Lesson Three: Moving Toward God's Intended Sexuality..... BFC 5:16

Lesson Four: Asking the Right Question..... BFC 5:17

Preface

Over the past several years, concern for the ongoing health of our church has prompted us to examine how we can most faithfully use Scripture in our response to the challenges of our time and place. This process, *Being a Faithful Church* (BFC), has undergone several stages:

BFC 1: Testing the spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment (March, 2009)

BFC 2: "Peace Church" as "Pacifist Church" (July, 2010)

BFC 3: A Plan to Discern Faithfulness on Matters of Sexuality (July, 2011)

BFC 4: Using the Bible in Helpful and Unhelpful Ways (July 2012)

BFC 4.1: Exercising our Interpreting Muscles: Testing our Interpretive Framework (Sept, 2012)¹

For each step along the way, we invited participation from Mennonite Church Canada congregations through questionnaires and studies. We are deeply grateful for your responses to both. They have guided this process.

In the latest stage, BFC 4.1, we compiled a list of helpful and unhelpful ways to use the Bible. The resulting document, *Exercising our Interpreting Muscles*, has also come to be known as the Paths and Ditches document. The wisdom found within its pages has shaped our exploration of Scripture in generating this resource.²

A brief study such as this one cannot do justice to all of the rich and diverse material contained in the Bible. We realize that much more could be said, and these summary pages may miss some important elements. We also acknowledge that others might interpret the material differently. Because of these possibilities, your commitment to further discussion and study is essential. To that end, Willard Metzger, Mennonite Church Canada Executive Director, has developed a series of reflections and questions that follow each chapter and the conclusion.

We invite you to discuss this material within your congregation. Select a format that works for you. Some of you may find Willard Metzger's Study Guide a useful entry point into the material for your congregations and you may wish to begin there. However, we do encourage everyone to

work through all of the material. Your approach might start with small group dialogues and then progress to a larger congregational discussion, or it might involve discussions between several members representing the diversity of your congregation. Whatever format you choose, we ask that you compile your final responses for the BFC Task Force to draw from as they shape the next steps in the process. Please email your responses to wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca by February 15, 2014.

When the BFC Task Force receives your responses to the study questions, several more steps are planned. The following schedule is proposed:

1. March, 2014: The BFC Task Force will receive your input and recommend a path to the General Board.
2. July, 2014: The recommendations will be brought to the Assembly for approval.
3. Fall, 2014: A study paper will then be developed and circulated to congregations to assist in the discernment of the approved recommendation(s).
4. February, 2015: The discernment responses will be collected by the BFC Task Force.
5. Spring, 2015: A report will be developed for the General Board.
6. Fall, 2015: Congregations will be asked to respond to the report of our initial discernment.
7. Spring, 2016: These responses will be collected and shared with our congregations.
8. July, 2016: The report, with recommendations, will be processed at the Assembly.

Why such an overview of sexuality in the Bible? Congregational feedback during the last two stages of the BFC process clearly indicated a need to examine sexuality in very broad terms. It told us that our discernment must be guided by an exploration of biblical perspectives on sexuality. The feedback also requested resources that would help to create a focal point within the broad nature of sexuality and the many challenges it presents for us in today's world. These pages comprise one response to those requests.

Sexuality does not stand alone in the Bible. It is entwined with faithfulness as an integral element in God's mission for creation. For that reason, this resource does not focus on any one element of sexuality in the Bible. It does not study specific biblical references to matters such as premarital sex, homosexuality, or other sexual issues. Instead, it attempts to examine the role of sexuality within the larger picture of God's mission. We trust that *Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality* will provide a helpful foundation for ongoing discernment about matters of sexuality.

1 To download the complete package of documents summarizing the process leading to the development of this resource, see <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1516>

2 For example, we explore a broad swath of Scripture (Path 5), we see Scripture addressing other parts of Scripture (Path 3, 4), we reference Jesus' use of Scripture (Path 1, 4), we see how Scripture is used for the sake of the vulnerable (Path 12), we see the entire canon of Scripture as instructive for discernment (Path 5, 6), and we have referenced what others have said before us (Path 11). We take seriously being part of God's story (Path 8), and the critical importance both of being and doing (Path 6, 9). We have prayed and delighted in God's word throughout this study (Path 7, 10).

This resource is recommended for study by:
The Being a Faithful Church Task Force of Mennonite Church Canada
Mennonite Church Canada General Board

November 2013

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Introduction

Compiling a review of biblical perspectives on human sexuality has been a complex undertaking. Scripture is the fruit of centuries of experience and inspiration, emerging from many viewpoints and addressed by a wide variety of authors and editors. Yet under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, unifying threads become evident in its pages.

This study has reinforced our conviction that Scripture can be trusted to provide wisdom and counsel for the nitty-gritty of our lives—even if that wisdom comes from circumstances, cultures, and historical assumptions that are very different from our own. We present this resource to you with humility, knowing that what it contains should not be considered exhaustive. However, we also trust that it will prove helpful as we strive to grow as a faithfully discerning community of God's people.

In the pages that follow, you will discover the most important thread: *according to biblical perspectives, sexuality does not stand alone.*

Biblical sexuality is intimately connected with God's design for creation. Healthy sexuality and faithful spirituality are so entwined that they both point to the same pillars of faith: committed relationships, interdependent communion, discipleship, and mission—extending God's grace and blessing to the world.

A holistic vision of faithfulness based upon these pillars is key to understanding God's journey with us from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem.

God's people, however, are not in the Garden, nor are we yet in the New City. Most of the Bible reflects life between these horizons—and scriptural perspectives about this between-time are multiple. We attempt to trace some of them and to indicate a few of the evident shifts.

The Bible gives witness to life between the horizons of the Garden and the New City, and invites us to discern our own time. We must look at the values of our culture, the challenges before us, and the spoken and unspoken assumptions that guide our understandings.³

A more extensive overview of the link between sexuality and God's design for creation is provided in Chapter One on page 4, and our discoveries are summarized in the conclusion on pages 11.

We offer you this resource to help direct your congregation in reflection, study, and group interaction. We trust that God's wisdom will find ways of encouraging us all, stimulating us to greater faithfulness.

Rudy Baergen
Robert J. Suderman
October, 2013

3 The Appendix on page 12 illustrates one story of assumptions that underlie our understandings.

Chapter One

The Link Between Sexuality and Spirituality: Covenantal Relationships

Sex, sexuality and the marriage covenant are not ends in themselves; they are linked to God's profound, loving mission for the world.

From the perspective of Scripture, wholesome sexuality is closely linked to wholesome spirituality, which we understand as our human effort to align ourselves with God's desire for our lives and for creation. Often the same words we associate with healthy "spirituality" also describe healthy "sexuality"—words like wholeness, trust, warmth, reverence, relationship, safety, love, truthfulness, oneness, communion, integrity, spontaneity, vulnerability, gratitude, and the importance of covenant, which binds these ingredients of commitment together.

The close link between spirituality and sexuality in the Bible is illustrated by the way Scripture often entwines two covenantal marriages: the covenant between God and God's people, and the covenant between man and woman. Both are intended to be mutual, reciprocal relationships, but occasionally God is the victimized husband of the unfaithful or adulterous spouse, Israel. In the Book of Revelation, the people of God are the holy and unblemished, adorned bride of Christ.⁴ In Ephesians, the relationship between Christ and the church is described as the model relationship for husband and wife.⁵

Why does the Bible use sexuality, and particularly marriage, to illustrate the covenantal commitment between God and God's people?

As strange as it may sound, sex, sexuality and the marriage covenant are not ends in themselves; they are linked to God's profound, loving mission for the world. They are the building blocks used by God to create the world, bless it with goodness, and then re-create and restore it with holiness, reconciliation and *shalom*. They are, in other words, missional.

The close link between spirituality and sexuality shows that healthy sexuality is more than sex. Sexuality is our way of being and relating in the world as male and female. Sexuality is rooted not only in our physical bodies but in our minds, feelings, wills, self-understandings, and our erotic longings. Sexuality embodies our longing to experience wholeness and intimacy. It moves us toward relationship and community, with God and with each other. Fundamentally, sexuality draws us into biblical covenant.

The sexuality metaphor illustrates that the biblical understanding of covenant is far more than a business contract. It is a mutual and intimate relationship between God and God's people. We, and God, yearn for the wholeness and intimacy best expressed through a communal commitment to the purposes of God.

In this way, God's objectives for covenant are meaningfully expressed through images of sexuality and marriage.

Both covenanted sexuality and covenanted spirituality find their best expression as *agape* love in action. This kind of love—selfless, unconditional, and potentially sacrificial—is offered as a decision rather than pure emotion. Both bind us together with God and with each other through eternal commitment. And both are instruments of God's mission in and for the world.

The story of sexuality/spirituality begins with the Garden of Eden in Genesis, and culminates with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, adorned for her husband, in Revelation.⁶ Both the Garden and the New Jerusalem symbolize harmonious, reciprocal relationships as they are meant to be, with creation, among human beings, and with God. In a sense, they represent the east and the west horizons—the rising and the setting of creation.

However, most Scripture focuses on the realities of life lived between these horizons. While life between is nourished by the ideals of creation, it persistently falls short of them. The biblical image of the city, for example, extends beyond Jerusalem, the new city of peace. It also reaches for the troubled cities of Babel, Sodom, Nineveh, and Babylon. Yet Jerusalem continues to symbolize the city God designed to heal and nourish.⁷ As God's people, we are called to be a visible city on the hill.⁸ There is a new creation in spite of the old one not living up to its potential.⁹

The delight of healthy sexuality and the pain of spiritual brokenness are experienced and readily understood by all of us. Sexuality offers one of the most profound images we have to contrast these realities with the healthy way God wants all relationships to be.

In summary

- *Both sexuality and covenanted spirituality find their best expression as agape love in action.*
- *The story of sexuality/spirituality begins in the Garden of Eden and culminates in the New Jerusalem.*
- *Both the Garden and the New Jerusalem symbolize harmonious, reciprocal relationships as they are meant to be—with creation, among human beings, and with God.*
- *Most Scripture focuses on the realities of broken life between the horizons of the Garden and the New Jerusalem.*

4 Rev 21:2

5 Eph 5:21-33

6 Gen 2:8; Rev 21:2, 10

7 Ps 122:6-9

8 Matt 5:14

9 Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17

Chapter Two

Perspectives from the Garden of Delight

From the beginning, God focused on relationship, companionship, community, covenantal bonding, and mission.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind (adam) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27).

What does it mean to say that we are made in God's image? Some scholars point to our rational capacity, others to our moral and spiritual "soul," still others to our stewardship/dominion role, or to the intrinsic value and dignity of human life. However, being created in the image of God also illustrates the significance of relationship. God clearly wants a relationship with us based upon companionship, community, covenant, and mission. Because we are created in God's image, we have been gifted with God's longing and capacity for relationship. God created us to relate—in a human way to God and in a godly way to each other.

Humankind is created in God's image—not alone as individual male or female, but as image bearers together in communion with each other. There is nothing more essential to understanding a biblical perspective on sexuality than this. Sexuality is not necessarily equated with sexual activity but with the goal of community and companionship. Without each other, we incompletely mirror the image of God.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

Not only are male and female created in the image of God, but they are "earth-creatures"¹⁰ called to participate in God's creative act. While procreation is not the only reason for human intimacy, the biblical view of sex and sexuality emphasizes the importance of procreation, children and family. Thus barrenness is the cause for deep sorrow—as experienced by Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. The Psalmist captures the sentiment:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them (Psalm 127:3-5).

God wills procreation, and human sexuality yearns for it, because it is integral to the plan of God. However, procreation is not designed simply for the sake of having offspring. It is intended to align the realities of creation with the intentions of God, including humankind's call to walk and talk with the Creator.

In Genesis, God tells Abraham and Sarah that from them will "come a great nation"; they will be given the gift of descendants so that they will be a continuing blessing to other families of the earth.¹¹

Children are a blessing for the *purposes* of blessing. It is through the continuation of blessing—via families—that God's transformation and liberation for the world will come. Here again we see the very close missional link between sexuality and spirituality.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good (Genesis 1:31).

Sexuality is a good gift from God, too. Genesis views sexuality as an integral part of God's good creation. Unlike the Greek perspective which separates body and soul, the Genesis perspective does not compartmentalize the body or give higher status to one over the other. According to the creation account, the physical, sexual body is good—in fact very good. Male and female stand vulnerable before each other, naked and unashamed, without self-consciousness or fear.

The Old Testament Song of Songs delights in the physical pleasures of love. Sexual language teases readers with the possibility of returning to the Garden, to the human state before disobedience.

In this Song, man and woman relate to one another once again with equality, "head over heels" in their love for each other. The natural world around them rejoices in their mutual love.¹² The lovers' Garden becomes the "the Garden of delight that Eden was meant to be, the place where life may be lived fully in the presence of God."¹³

The fact that there is no overt reference to God in this love poetry has led some to believe it is purely secular. Yet interpretations throughout the centuries view it as a theological metaphor idealizing God's love for Israel, or Christ's love for the church, or even God's intimate connection with the individual human soul.

Human love, "the desire for intimate, harmonious, enduring relationship with the other,"¹⁴ is a metaphor for God's sacred love. Surely, this is why the Song of Songs has found a place in Jewish and Christian Scriptures and tradition.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

11 Gen 12:1-3

12 Song of Sol 2:8-17

13 Ellen Davis, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, Westminster Bible Companion, 2000, p. 232.

14 *ibid.*, p. 235

10 "Earth-creatures" is a literal translation of "adam."

Then the man said,

*This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to
his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife
were both naked, and were not ashamed*
(Genesis 2: 18, 21-25).

The only time that we find the words “it is not good” in the early chapters of Genesis is when God observes that the male is alone. His loneliness cannot be satisfied by God or by any other living creature.

The helper whom God creates is a suitable, bonding companion, not one of subordination but of mutuality.¹⁵ With God’s focus on relationship, companionship, community, and covenantal bonding, the helper God creates is neither inferior nor superior, but someone with whom man can build human community. Until woman is created, he is incomplete and alone. Because they are of the same origin, man does not exercise authority over woman by naming her as he does the other creatures. She is simply referred to as “woman”, and the two become one flesh. Only when they must leave the Garden does he name the woman “Eve.”¹⁶

The man declares that woman is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,”¹⁷ describing an undivided relationship, like Israel’s covenant relationship with God. In their devotion to each other, man and woman reflect more of what they already are: *one flesh*.

15 In Ex 18:4 and Ps 30:10; 54:4 the word “helper” is also used of God, once more illustrating the reciprocity of relationship.

16 Gen 3:20

17 Gen 2:23

The male leaves his family and clings to his wife, a term that is also used to speak of Israel’s faithfulness in her covenant with God.¹⁸ Rabbinic tradition understands *becoming one flesh* in at least three ways:

- Because woman is created from man’s side, man is incomplete without her and she is incomplete without him. They are one flesh.
- Together, man and woman continue to create, and the resulting child becomes the seamless melding of the two into one flesh.
- Through the sexual intimacy that makes offspring possible, man and woman become one flesh.

In each of the interpretations above, the covenantal clinging of man and woman involves participating in God’s creative plan, and mirrors God’s own covenant with humans.

In summary

- *As beings created in the image of God, man and woman were created to relate—in a human way to God and in a godly way to each other.*
- *Procreation is not simply for the sake of having offspring. As in the promise to Abraham and Sarah, descendants are to continue God’s creative purposes in the world and bring God’s blessing to other families of the earth.*
- *Because of God’s focus on relationship, companionship, community, and covenantal bonding, the helper is neither inferior nor superior, but someone with whom man can build human community.*
- *When man declares that woman is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” he is describing an undivided, reciprocal relationship, like Israel’s covenant relationship with God.*

18 Deut 11:22; 30:20; Josh 22:5

Chapter Three

Broken Links

Scripture focuses on the realities of life lived between horizons. The brokenness of human relationships with the one and only God also shatters the proper relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."
(Genesis 3:7-10)

When Eve and Adam disobey God, their eyes open. They realize that they are naked. They grow fearful of walking and talking with their Maker. As a result, they must leave the Garden. Thus begins the long trek toward the other horizon, the New Jerusalem—the City of Peace.

Between horizons, spirituality and sexuality are entwined in their brokenness. Our own experience in church and society substantiates this. What characterizes this broken reality? Discord and blaming. Now, while still good, sexuality will also bear the pain of procreation through childbirth for the female, and inequality between husband and wife. The male struggles in his relationship with the soil. It yields thorns and thistles, and eventually reclaims him.¹⁹

The artificial separation of what belongs together results in brokenness in human relationships and daily toil.

Sexuality is fraught with new realities between horizons. Dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence appear. Abraham has sex with Sarai's servant. Polygamy becomes common. When the men of Sodom attempt to rape their male guests, Lot offers his two daughters to them instead. King David abuses his power by having sex with Uriah's wife, and then has Uriah killed. David's son, Amnon, rapes his own half-sister, Tamar, and then turns her away, desolate. In revenge, Tamar's brother, Absalom, kills Amnon. And the sordid story goes on.

Sexuality and spirituality are unmoored from God's purposes. The prophets use graphic sexual imagery to underscore this brokenness.²⁰ When Israel is enticed away from the one and only God by the idols of Canaan—who often are fertility gods—the prophets describe the idolatrous relationship as prostitution. In fact, Israel's sexuality is so broken that even the prophet's favourable metaphor for God is one of the noble, grieving bridegroom—but in these prophetic passages, that image carries within it the abhorrent dimensions of jealousy, control, spouse starvation, humiliation, violence and a cycle of abuse. Even the prophet's metaphor for God, drawn from the sexuality of the day, reflects Israel's brokenness.²¹

19 Gen 3:19
20 Hos 2; Jer 3:12-15
21 Ezek 16

The New Testament further develops the prophetic image of broken sexuality. With the description of the whore in the Book of Revelation,²² sexuality is completely severed from its intended spiritual purpose. Broken sexuality becomes "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations."²³ This time the utter brokenness of sexuality and spirituality is not used to describe the church, but the state—likely a reference to the persecuting Roman Empire. The whore's deviance goes far beyond her own activity. She is the one "with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk."²⁴

The writer of the apocalypse uses sexual imagery to forcefully describe the rupture of God's intentions through the actions of nations.

The misuse and abuse of God's intentions for sexuality are serious matters for the "body" of the individual and the "Body" of God's people. The two cannot—or at least should not—be separated. The Apostle Paul states:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?"
(1 Corinthians 6:15-19).

Paul's expression, "you are not your own," speaks to the unity God intends between sexuality and spirituality, and emphasizes the seriousness of breaking that union.

New Testament writers are aware that human sexuality has broken away from faithful spirituality in this time between horizons. Sexual immorality is often included in their lists of "evil intentions" that come "out of the heart."²⁵

In summary

- *When Eve and Adam disobey God, they become aware of their nakedness and fearful of their Maker. They are cast out of the Garden, the place where sexuality and spirituality are entwined as God intended. They must live between horizons as they trek toward the New Jerusalem.*
- *Sexuality is fraught with new realities on this journey. Dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence prevail.*
- *The prophetic image of broken sexuality is potently described in the Book of Revelation with the description of the whore. Sexuality is completely severed from its intended spiritual purpose, and unmoored from its identity with God.*

22 Rev 17:1-16; 19:2

23 Rev 17:5

24 Rev 17:2

25 Matt 15:19. See also Mark 7:21; 1 Cor 5; Gal 5:19-21; Rom 1:24-32

Chapter Four

Redesigning the Garden as We Journey Toward the New City

Scripture does not give up hope for healthy spirituality and sexuality. There are many efforts to redesign and re-fashion an understanding of God's will for creation and God's people, according to the time and circumstances in which they find themselves.

While God's people live between horizons, Scripture focuses on maintaining as much resemblance to God's ideal as possible, and restoring or limiting broken realities wherever practical. These dynamic and diverse efforts are directed toward redesigning and refashioning understandings of God's will for people and creation in the midst of particular circumstances, times, and needs. Between horizons, Scripture deals with pastoral concerns and imperfections of the human condition, including matters that we don't always understand. At the same time, they point toward God's larger ideal and purpose.

God addresses these broken realities with a strategy that highlights both the origin and destiny of creation. God does not want to give up on sexuality at its best, designed for the well-being of creation. Nor does God want to accept practices of sexual abuse that are generated as people live in the broken world.

Perspectives from the Old Testament

The Old Testament offers many attempts to control and organize the brokenness of life. It is intended to counter the degradation resulting from a broken sexuality and spirituality, an understanding that is also addressed in the New Testament.²⁶

For example, when women became the property of their husbands rather than their helpers, the Law of Moses added protection for women through divorce procedures.²⁷ While a man is prohibited from having sex with another man's wife—which would rupture the marriage covenant—he is obligated to impregnate the widow of his deceased brother to ensure continuation of the family line as an instrument of blessing for the world.²⁸ Many sexual expressions violate the yearned-for unity of healthy sexuality and spirituality. As a result, they are disallowed by law and result in severe punishment.²⁹

Despite the brokenness of sexuality and spirituality, Old Testament prophets continue to use metaphors of courtship and marriage to describe the covenant that God desires with Israel. God is faithful to Israel and God redeems Israel, the cast-off wife:³⁰ "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."³¹ God's covenant with Israel, says Hosea, is like a loving marriage that reflects both the Garden of Delight full of animals, birds, and creeping things, and the need for a City of Peace—a place of safety where the bow, sword, and war are abolished:

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (Hosea 2:18-19).

God is portrayed as a lover and husband infatuated with Israel. When Israel is unfaithful, God is heart-broken and eagerly awaits reconciliation.³² God invites Israel, the bride, back into covenant.

Deuteronomy expressly forbids intermarriage with foreigners and their inclusion in the Assembly of the Lord.³³ But in Isaiah, we find a surprisingly pastoral response to the law of the foreigner:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:3-5).

With these words, Deuteronomic laws for both the eunuch and the foreigner are inverted. These "outsiders" no longer need to remain separated from God's people. God's original and final intent for all people is restored; "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."³⁴ This is an understanding that Jesus also demonstrates when he cleanses the temple.³⁵

The Book of Ruth offers another picture of redesigning and restoring God's purposes. In an effort to maintain Israel's covenant as a chosen people, the Law clearly prohibits marriage between Israelites and foreigners.³⁶ Ezra and Nehemiah even call for a mass divorce from foreign wives,³⁷ but the book of Ruth offers a different response.³⁸ In order to fulfill the law of the deceased brother,³⁹ Boaz takes Ruth, the Moabite and foreign daughter-in-law of Naomi, as his wife. The stated purpose is to make sure that "the dead may not be cut off from his kindred."⁴⁰ But in doing so, Boaz violates the law of the foreigner that prohibits a Moabite from entering the assembly of the Lord.⁴¹ Ironically, Ruth, the forbidden Moabite, becomes the model Israelite. The offspring of Boaz and Ruth, Obed, becomes the grandfather of King David.⁴²

26 1 Tim 1:8-11

27 Deut 22:19, 29

28 Deut 25:5-6

29 Lev 18; 20:10-21; 21:1-9

30 Isa 54:6

31 Isa 62:5

32 Jer 3:12-15

33 Deut 7:1-7; 23:3

34 Isa 56:8

35 Mark 11:17

36 Deut 7:2-6; 23:3

37 Ezra 9-10, Neh. 13

38 Ruth 4:10-15

39 Deut 25:6

40 Ruth 4:10

41 Deut 23:3

42 Ruth 4:17-22

God continues to work through us despite our brokenness.

Other disadvantaged women contribute to this legacy. Consider Rachel, Leah, and their maids, who “together built up the house of Israel.”⁴³ Each of these women are sexual partners of Jacob, who then becomes the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then there is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, who marries two of Judah’s sons sequentially, and when they each die she bears twins from Judah, her farther-in-law, through an act of prostitution.⁴⁴

Fast-forward to the New Testament and Matthew’s Gospel, and these colourful ancestors of Jesus, the Messiah, are listed alongside those who would be deemed more “righteous.” Jacob is named as father of Judah. Judah is cited as father to the twins Perez and Zerah by Tamar, who had married two of Judah’s sons. The line is then traced via Perez, whose line directly leads to Boaz. Boaz is listed as the son of Rahab the prostitute and the father of Obed, via Ruth the Moabite foreigner. The blood-line ends with “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”⁴⁵

In the realities of their circumstances, people who do not reflect God’s ideal are instrumental in the birth of the Messiah. God’s purposes are accomplished in strange and surprising ways.

Perspectives from the New Testament

Hope for creation’s restoration continues in the New Testament. Throughout its pages, sexuality and spirituality are interrelated. The story of Jesus and his early followers unfolds within the framework of a new creation that comes in Christ:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
(II Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus’ views on sexuality and covenant

The Word becomes flesh in the man Jesus, who remains single. We know nothing of Jesus’ relationship to his earthly father, but his relationship with his mother and siblings seems tense at times.⁴⁶ He uses the intimate term “Abba”—father—for God, and the Gospels call Jesus God’s Son. Jesus’ innermost circle of disciples is male, but he has close friendships with women. This is against social norms of the time and sometimes of shock to the Pharisees. He has women followers, too.⁴⁷ Jesus cares for children and speaks sharply against those who harm them. His perspective of masculinity does not demand violent resistance to the Romans. Instead, he allows himself to be stripped and shamefully crucified.

Jesus rarely speaks directly to issues of sexuality. His parables and teachings focus primarily on the abuse of wealth and power. His greatest priority is his spiritual connection with God and what God wishes to do in the world. Even so, Jesus ties sexual lust to the commandment against adultery. He stands up for a woman caught in the act of adultery. He strengthens the protection of vulnerable women when he speaks out against divorce more emphatically than do some of his contemporary rabbis.

When the Pharisees question Jesus about the Law of Moses, where divorce is permitted under some circumstances, Jesus points beyond that

law and back to the Garden. He reminds the Pharisees of the male-female image as one flesh and about man clinging to his wife.⁴⁸ This, for Jesus, is the hope that informs us. He states that a divorced man who takes another woman for his wife becomes an adulterer, yet he makes an exception to that rule in the case of unchastity.⁴⁹ This is clearly an acknowledgment that we live between horizons.

Jesus carefully upholds God’s ideal while recognizing the context in which people find themselves. He allows for an exception and redesigns the Garden in a way that leads us toward the New City. Jesus indicates that becoming eunuchs for the kingdom is preferable to insisting that we need to be fruitful and multiply. He weighs what appear to be contrasting values, and decides to emphasize one value over the other. And he adds: “Let anyone accept this who can.”⁵⁰

The biological family and traditional assumptions of sexuality take second place to the proclamation of the coming kingdom where a new family is being created. In this family, God is parent, Jesus is Son, and those who follow him are brothers and sisters in Christ.

When a woman from the crowd shouts out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” Jesus replies, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”⁵¹ Sexuality must be in service of spirituality. It is not because of biological organs, motherhood, marriage, procreation, or family heritage that one gains the blessing of God, but through obedience to God.

By placing everything under the scrutiny of godly obedience, Jesus challenges the fabric of family in his society:

Let the dead bury the dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:60).

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

The New Testament proclaims that God becomes flesh and dwells among humanity. And just as we find God creating human sexuality at the beginning of the story in the Garden, so we find Jesus’ sexuality remains embodied at his resurrection. His disciples touch him, eat with him, and converse with him. The risen Jesus remains recognizable as the sexual being that they knew.

Why did Jesus remain embodied as male? This is an important mystery to ponder. While we tend to de-sexualize any post-resurrection life—suggesting that sexuality is not good and belongs in the impure realm—the risen Christ is embodied as a sexual being. This underscores the importance of holding body and spirit—sexuality and spirituality—in unity. It is a clear reminder that God created sexuality for good.

Paul and the image of marriage

Like Jesus, the Apostle Paul lives as a single male. Paul discourages marriage because “the appointed time has grown short,”⁵² but deems it necessary in the face of uncontrollable passions.⁵³ For the married

43 Ruth 4:11

44 Gen 38:24

45 Matt 1:1-16

46 Mark 3:31-35

47 Luke 8:2-3

48 Matt 19:1-12

49 From the Greek word “porneia”

50 Matt 19:12

51 Luke 11: 27-28

52 I Cor 7:29

53 I Cor 7:36

couple, Paul encourages the mutuality in conjugal relations.⁵⁴ His views regarding the role of women in the community and the ministry of the church seem diverse. At times he admonishes women to be silent in church, yet women are key leaders in his ministry. However, Paul goes beyond Jesus and allows for separation, particularly when an unbeliever does not wish to remain married.⁵⁵ Still, he seems to attribute saving value to the marriage union, even when it is with an unbeliever. The overriding concern is that “God has called us to peace.”⁵⁶ Paul understands that in some mysterious way, an unbelieving spouse is made holy through the believing one.⁵⁷

The Letter to the Ephesians uses Christ’s relationship with the Church as a model for how husband and wife should relate to each other.⁵⁸ Sexuality and spirituality come together once more to help us visualize God’s intention, just as they did through the prophets in the Old Testament. The relationship of husband and wife is one of mutual subordination, respect, love, and sacrifice, even to the point of death. It also carries a deeper covenantal significance—we are all of one body as the church. The capacity of the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and the wife to respect her husband, is ultimately described as a “great mystery.”⁵⁹ It symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the church,⁶⁰ but in the process the church is encouraged to reflect on *her* relationship to *her* “husband.”

The image of marriage is clearly tied to the description of creation’s final reconciliation. The church, portrayed as the holy city—the New Jerusalem—is like a “bride adorned for her husband.”⁶¹ The church is the “bride of the Lamb,”⁶² getting ready for the “marriage of the Lamb.”⁶³ There seems to be no better image than marriage to describe God’s desire for the future of the church and the world.

Nothing is impossible with God

We do not know anything about the marital status of the twelve apostles, other than for Peter, but Jesus and Paul both remained single. As key figures of the New Testament, their example of singleness needs further comment.

The emphasis on exercising maleness in a way that does not require a man to “cling to his wife” or to be “fruitful and multiply” is noteworthy. This seems to be one of the ways in which the New Testament actually redesigns rather than restores the Garden. It draws attention to elements such as singleness and celibacy that are missing in the Genesis accounts. It replaces the importance of procreation with the need for faithfulness and commitment to God’s mission in the world. This is a startling shift in understanding the role of sexuality in God’s plan.

While the Garden tips the scales toward offspring, the New Testament tips the scales toward focused commitment to God’s Kingdom. In

54 1 Cor 7:1-5
55 1 Cor 7:10-16
56 1 Cor 7:15
57 1 Cor 7:14
58 Eph 5:21-33
59 Eph 5:32
60 Eph 5:32
61 Rev 21:2
62 Rev 21:9
63 Rev 19:7

either case, male and female sexuality remain. But the option of singleness and celibacy is assumed to be acceptable, even preferred and necessary at times.

With his special birth, Jesus joins a long list of significant biblical characters born through God’s intervention in the normal processes of human procreation—Isaac from elderly, barren Sarah; Jacob and Esau from barren Rebekah; Reuben and his brothers from Leah because she is not loved; Joseph to barren Rachel, to take away her reproach; Samuel to miserable Hannah whose womb had been mysteriously closed by God;⁶⁴ and John the Baptist to elderly, barren Elizabeth “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”⁶⁵ The Psalmist celebrates this surprising power of God: “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!”⁶⁶

After the angel Gabriel announces the news of pending miraculous births to Elizabeth and Mary, he concludes by stating that “nothing will be impossible with God.”⁶⁷ The birth of the Messiah to the virgin, single Mary is the culmination of God’s special blessing on marginalized women of the biblical story in order to bring about God’s purposes. In each case, God reaches out to a vulnerable woman and gives to her a significant place in the story of God’s people.

Jesus’ virgin birth brings continuity to the earlier biblical story of special births, but it also brings discontinuity. This special birth takes place apart from the human sexual act and apart from the male. Thus in the end, God’s salvation plan does not depend on the human procreation initiated in the Garden. The virgin birth is one more example of how God can use—or not use—human sexuality to fulfill God’s mission for humanity on earth.

From the virginal womb of unmarried Mary, God begins the new creation in Christ.

In summary

- *The Old Testament offers many attempts to control and organize the brokenness of life between horizons.*
- *Even when the law is broken, God finds ways to use offenders for good purpose. This is apparent through the human lineage of Jesus, which contains murderers and adulterers.*
- *While the Garden tips the scales toward offspring, the New Testament tips the scales toward focused commitment to God’s Kingdom.*
- *The virgin birth is one more example of how God can use—or not use—human sexuality to fulfill God’s mission for humanity on earth.*
- *Christ’s relationship with the Church serves as a model for how husband and wife should relate to each other.*
- *There seems to be no better image than marriage to describe God’s desire for the future of the church and the world.*

64 1 Sam 1:5
65 Luke 1:17
66 Psalm 113:9
67 Luke 1:37

Conclusion

Although it is clear that we cannot fully do justice to biblical perspectives on sexuality in a short study, it is time to take stock of the rich discoveries we have made.

We have seen a somewhat bewildering array of stories, experiences, and perspectives in terms of the relationship between sexuality and faithfulness. We have witnessed soaring hopes in the Garden, and the multiple and miserable ways those hopes were betrayed. We have also witnessed God's tenacious patience to move God's mission forward and through the imperfect world between the horizons of the Garden and the New Jerusalem.

God has not been foiled by rape, prostitution, adultery, and fornication. God has not been paralysed by patriarchal abuse, the slavery of women, or the injustice and violence of social systems. Instead, God used a surprising menu of initiatives such as:

- transforming barrenness and old age into fertility;
- incorporating foreigners and maids as key contributors to the lineage of God's people;
- encouraging singleness and eunuchs in the development of the Kingdom; and
- engaging celibacy and virginity.

All of these events occurred to advance God's mission of reconciling creation. This underscores the key affirmation: when all is said and done, the primary focus of sexuality is not simply ethical, it is theological. God is good. God is faithful. God's covenant with humanity will not be thwarted. God, and only God, is God.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul summarizes this best by indicating that previous critical categories, including maleness and femaleness, are reshaped through Christ Jesus in favour of the overarching hope of God's promise:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.
(Galatians 3:28-29).

Some observations as we go forward

We conclude by drawing attention to some things in Scripture that are especially striking from our perspectives today. Consider:

- the entwining of sexuality with spiritual faithfulness;

- the understanding of sexuality in covenantal terms as a foundation for a covenantal people;
- the close tie between sexuality and God's missional purpose in the world;
- the New Testament's shift away from procreation to bring about God's purposes;
- the shifting interpretation and practice of "law" in terms of the inclusion and exclusion of foreigners in the people of covenant;
- the option of singleness and virginity as legitimate and even necessary parts of sexuality;
- the equality of male and female "in Christ," just as Jews and Gentiles are equal "in Christ";
- the persistent effort to use marriage, sexuality, and sex as images to understand God's covenantal purposes for people-hood; and
- the inclusion of inappropriate sexual behaviours such as prostitution and rape in the Messiah's ancestry.

This review helps us to realize that as a church and as a society, we live between the horizons of the Garden of Delight and the City of Peace. Even at their best, our present realities rarely reflect biblical preferences. This is as true about sexuality within our marriages as it is about sexuality beyond them. Paul's insight that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"⁶⁸ certainly rings true when we try to measure our own expressions of sexuality in light of God's design.

It is helpful to note how much of the Bible is dedicated to pastoral concerns raised by living between horizons, always with the hope of moving toward the New City. Laws, lessons, images, and actions struggle to maintain some resemblance to the Garden in the realities of the time between. Different voices and diverse strategies unite in the struggle for faithfulness.

Biblical sexuality is intimately entwined with spirituality and God's design for creation, as we witnessed in the Garden and yearn for in the New City. Restoration and redesign are clearly evident in biblical understandings and practices. As we live between horizons, we can be assured that God will continue to work in unexpected ways, transforming apparent impossibilities into key possibilities for mission and ultimately, restoration.

68 Rom 3:23

Appendix

The Power of Context

My wife, Irene, and I (Robert J. Suderman) visited an Anabaptist pastor and his wife in east-central India. We met their recently-married son, in his late twenties, and his young wife, who shared their home.

The young couple's marriage had been arranged by their respective parents, especially by the fathers. We talked about how their system works, and how they feel about it.

The son spoke enthusiastically. "There is no one else in the world that knows me as well as my father, so when it came time to look for a wife, I fully trusted that he would choose one who would match who I am. I had no doubt about his judgment."

The young woman expressed similar thoughts, indicating how good and secure she felt knowing that her parents were looking out for her welfare, and that they would never agree to a marriage unless they felt it was the very best for her.

We delicately approached the issue of "love" and the role it plays in choosing a marriage partner. They all agreed that the most important priorities for both parties are commitment to each other, family support, and the union's financial sustainability.

"Now that we are married," they said, "we are learning to love each other, a little more each day. It's a process." And they looked at each other with admiration and genuine trust.

They went on to describe the courting process. After being informed of the choice made, they were introduced and had several months to get to know each other. They also had the opportunity to say "no" to the choice if it seemed to be a mismatch. The well-regulated pre-marriage process lasted about six months and then the marriage was celebrated.

Our western/Canadian values were profoundly challenged—even shaken—by this table conversation. Although we are brothers and sisters in Christ, our assumptions vary dramatically:

- We assume that marriage is between two people; they assume it is between two families.
- We assume individual discernment is best in choosing a partner; they assume that marriage is too important to leave to the fleeting desires of the young. Older, wiser, broader discernment is needed.
- We assume that love is the foundation of marriage; they assume that communal commitment and covenant is the foundation. Love will follow later.
- We assume that attraction, including sexual attraction, is a prerequisite; they assume that attraction will be earned and will grow slowly with time.
- We assume that choosing marriage is a right of the individual; they assume that choosing marriage is a communal responsibility. The community can say "no" even though the individual says "yes."
- We assume that procreation is a free choice of the couple; they assume that bearing children in marriage is a responsibility for the survival of the family.

Between the Garden and the New City, biblical cultures do not measure up to God's design. They are not uniform in their understandings of sexuality or in their approaches to faithfulness. We find this same discord in today's cultures as we continue to live between horizons. Legal, political, medical and social perspectives, and attitudes toward sexuality, marriage, and gender, are in dramatic flux.

It takes a concerted effort for us to understand and appreciate each other. It is difficult to accept the assumed values of another culture and context.

This experience is instructive for the task before us. As we explore sexuality between the horizons, we should not be surprised if we encounter other perspectives that challenge our deeply held preferences. Nor should we be surprised by the variations we see in the diverse landscape of Scripture itself.



Between Horizons: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality Assembly 2014 Discernment Guide

Introduction:

The BFC process is now into its fifth year of discernment and conversation. We are very pleased with the response of congregations to this significant effort. To this point (April 15, 2014), 65% of our 218 congregations have responded in some way. The responses have been quite evenly spread across the church, from 44% to 71% in the five Area Churches.

There has been very good personal contact and visits to 16% of the congregations where English is not their primary language. More are scheduled in the near future. Several congregations have indicated that further responses are still pending. In addition, we have received responses from individuals, a circle of scholars, and various groups with special interests in the conversation.

A large majority of the responses affirm the process and support it.

It is important to note that what is reflected in this report is accurately descriptive of what we have received and heard – to the best of our ability.

Responses to BFC 5: Biblical Perspectives on Human Sexuality:

To this point, we have received 82 responses to the BFC 5, the highest response rates to date. This level of interest and response is quite remarkable and very encouraging.

Congregations that did not participate in the BFC 5 process have identified various reasons:

- a) Lack of time in the annual schedule;
- b) Transitions of leadership in the congregation;
- c) Concern about causing conflict among congregational members;
- d) Other pressing agenda considered more urgent;
- e) The study was too similar to what they have already done in the recent past.

Observations of Responses:

1. Much appreciation was expressed for the resource. Special mention was made of the link suggested between sexuality and spirituality, and the concept of living between the horizons.
2. Although there was some call for change, most responses reflected

a lack of desire to change the historical understanding of sexuality as implied in the resolutions of Saskatoon (1986), Purdue (1987), and the Confession of Faith (1995). At the same time, there is also an expressed desire to strengthen our compassionate embrace of persons in same-sex attraction.

3. Many respondents hesitated to declare their submission as representative of their congregations. Rather they identified small groups, leadership groups, or individuals as responsible for the feedback. This indicates that within congregations we are not of one mind.
4. There is strong recognition that the church needs to respond in a Christ-like compassionate way to persons attracted to the same sex in our society. Several reasons were identified:
 - i. Increasingly, our society and culture view same-sex relations as a justice issue;
 - ii. Same-sex marriage has been legalized in Canada;
 - iii. Christian concerns are often viewed as compassionless and reactionary;
 - iv. Our youth often find the traditional view incomprehensible and see the church as out of touch with its time.
5. Some express the concern that this discernment should not overshadow the importance of our larger missional vision and work.
6. There is evident difference in biblical interpretation as related to matters of same-sex attraction and relationships.
7. There was again strong affirmation that Scripture and the leading of the Spirit are foundational in our discernment process.
8. There is a strong rejection of immorality and promiscuity in all our relationships.
9. There is a conviction that sexual union belongs in the framework of a life-long commitment.
10. There is a need to cultivate healthy, wholesome sexuality in our culture and church.
11. There are differences in understanding the medical/scientific data/evidence available to date.
12. Some would have preferred a less academic, simplified document.



Unity, Christ's Love, and Faithfulness in Discerning Matters of Sexuality

Background

The calling/vocation of the church is to seek to understand the desires of God for our times and share this good news. Mennonite Church Canada is now in the 7th year of a discernment process to strengthen our capacity to be the church even while we consider difficult issues that face congregations. At this time the BFC process is considering sexuality in broad terms, and more specifically same-sex committed relationships. The documents and the Assembly affirmations in the BFC process to date can be found on the Mennonite Church Canada website at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1930. At Assembly 2014 delegates considered a paper on Biblical perspectives on sexuality (BFC5) as well as the feedback summarized in BFC 5.1 in which the following trends were identified:

1. In spite of congregations not being able to reach consensus, responses stated a deep desire for unity and that challenges of same-sex relations should not cause divisions at congregational, Area, or National church levels.
2. A significant majority of responses reflect the historical affirmations as implied in the Resolution on Sexuality (1986 & 1987) or Article 19 of the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995). At the same time the responses express a desire to be more compassionate and welcoming of those individuals who are same-sex attracted.
3. Beyond this majority of responses, there were two contrasting sets of significantly smaller numbers of submissions: a) responses that oppose any revisiting of the historical understanding of biblical sexuality, and b) responses that call for more inclusion of persons in same-sex relationships, including welcoming them as members, leaders, and as committed same-sex partners.

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. Although BFC 5 did not request a specific response to same sex relationships, many comments were received. The responses have revealed significant differences of understanding of the will of God relating to same sex relationships even while Scripture has been the foundation. The responses also 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? Is the challenge for us now to see the fruit of this discernment as also being led by the Spirit of God?"

Delegates at Assembly 2014 affirmed (90% in favour) that three important questions emerged from the feedback received. Processing these questions will be the work of BFC 6. Responses also requested that additional resources be identified to enhance congregational discernment.

This BFC 6 discernment guide identifies each of these three questions with additional comments and sub-questions to enhance your discussions. The discernment guide also includes a list of resources which may be of assistance.

**The BFC Task Force asks for your feedback by Feb 28, 2015.
Please send responses to:**

**Willard Metzger, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd, Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4
or by email: wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca**

Please include with your responses, your answer to the following question:

I / our group / our congregation would consider sharing our response to the BFC process beyond my congregation.

I give permission to be contacted for further discussion: __ Yes __ No

Discernment Questions

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?

This question probes the essence of unity.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul exhorts us to:

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

We can presume that this appeal to unity was needed because there was disagreement in the communities that received this letter. In the face of disagreement, their task was to maintain the unity that they had been given by God's Spirit. Christ had linked them together by a chain of peace.

Paul identifies several links necessary to strengthen unity in the face of disagreement: humility, gentleness, patience, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness (4:2-3). Such unity in the face of disagreement equips the Body of Christ for service (4:12), and correct understanding (4:13f) so that it grows and is built up in love (4:16).

It seems from the responses received to BFC 5.1 that respondents have reflected this dynamic relationship between unity and disagreement. On the one hand, the responses do indicate a sincere yearning for the unity of the Spirit while, on the other hand, the responses reveal significant disagreement in our understandings of same-sex relationships in the church. Paul's challenge to us is to be willing to chain ourselves together in peace in order to maintain the unity we desire.

Rather than a focus on agreement, the passage (and **Question #1**) repositions unity as a character of relationship.

- a) What important characteristics are necessary to maintain unity while acknowledging different understandings in matters of same-sex relationships?
- b) How has your congregation dealt with disagreement on other matters in the past? What has worked well in your discernment in those moments? What did not work well?
- c) What would be necessary to create sufficient space to acknowledge our disagreements on matters of sexuality while continuing to work at our common larger vision and mission?
- d) How can we honour those within our church who disagree with a widely-held viewpoint?

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.

Congregations may express this desire in different ways. For example, your congregation may wish to strengthen your expression of Christ's love to those of same-sex orientation while continuing to embrace Mennonite Church Canada's historic understandings of sexuality [as defined by the Saskatoon Resolution on Sexuality (1986) and the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective].

Or, in this desire to show Christ's love, your congregation may find itself pushing up against the traditional understandings of sexuality (as defined in the denominational documents) and feel led by the Spirit and their study of Scripture to move to a new place of greater acceptance of same-sex relationships.

We look forward to receiving a more complete description of what our congregations would look like as they live out Christ's love in the area of human sexuality.¹ We hope that we can share these descriptions across our denomination.

Question #3:

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

¹ The following suggestions come from feedback received: Does it mean seeking a better understanding of the best medical, scientific information available regarding same-sex orientation? Or hearing from non-heterosexual Christian brothers and sisters about their experience with Christ and the church? Or coming to understand better how the Bible is interpreted both within the historical understanding of the church and by Christian brothers and sisters who favour a more inclusive attitude to committed same-sex relationships? Or becoming more welcoming in ways that in your estimation remain within the parameters of the historical understanding?

Resource Opportunities for Individual, Group and Congregational Study

The BFC Task Force wants to alert you to resourcing opportunities in three broad categories, each category containing several available resources.

1) General and Specific Resource Collections:

a) Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre

(<http://resources.mennonitechurch.ca/Home>)

This Centre has ample resources that have been collected over many years. These resources have been chosen according to certain criteria that the Centre uses for acquisitions. These resources represent a broad range of writings, videos, and teaching materials.

Some helpful resources specific to sexuality can be found at: www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2385

Biblical hermeneutics: www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2345

b) Educational Institutions:

i) Resource Suggestions from AMBS

www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2414

ii) Dr. Loren Johns website: tracking the sexuality debates in our churches:

Dr. Johns is one of our teachers of New Testament at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He has taken a special interest in the discussions about sexuality for decades, and has tracked these discussions in helpful ways. He has paid special attention to ways that the Bible is (or isn't) used in the conversations regarding sexuality. It is a valuable resource for all wishing to understand the biblical discussions more profoundly. <http://ljohns.ambseu.org/menu.htm>

c) Resources to help us understand better the LGBTQ understandings of sexuality and Christian faith.

The resources on this website have been recommended by the Pilgrim Group, a ministry of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. <http://bethelmennonite.ca/temp/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Suggested-Resources-revised-June-2012.pdf>

d) Mennonite Church USA:

i) **“Seeking God’s Will Together.”** This is a 6 session online video and study guide dealing with many of the same questions the BFC process has wrestled with. Congregations wishing to use this online resource can find it at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2437. Or, if you prefer to purchase a DVD with the teaching sessions, please email Shana Peachey Boshart (shanaboshart@centralplainsmc.org) directly.

ii) Resource Suggestions from MC USA:

http://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Biblical_TheologicalResources.pdf

2) Mennonite Church Canada Commissioned Resources regarding the themes under discussion:

a) “The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ”

Presentation of the Faith and Life Committee of Mennonite Church Canada for the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2007. At the time, this presentation was designed to address the issue of some congregations wishing to be “Area Church Only.” The Committee addressed questions such as:

- What does it mean to be a faithful Mennonite Church?
- What binds us together?
- Is organizational unity and unity in Christ synonymous?
- When does diversity destroy the unity of Christ?
- How are we mutually accountable in the body of Christ?
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2429

b) Video on Homosexuality and Biblical Interpretation, requested by the BFC Task Force and produced by Dr. Loren Johns and AMBS.

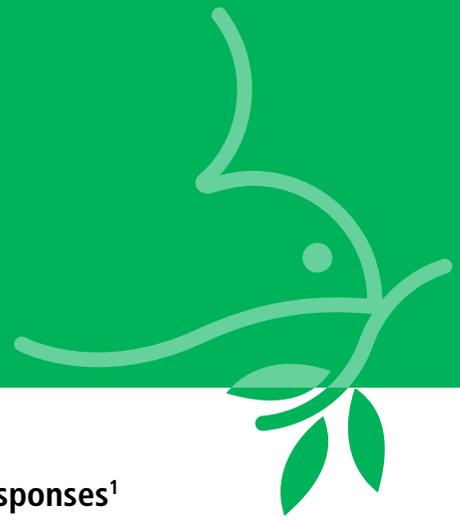
This video is a very brief overview (37 minutes) of the various texts and issues raised by the biblical witness in regards to understanding the current conversation about same-sex commitment. Dr. Johns also indicates key characteristics of an Anabaptist way of reading the Bible. As indicated earlier, Dr. Johns has been tracking this conversation for many years, and this is a summary of what he has seen.

www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2399

c) Resources produced by the BFC process:

We remind congregations that 3 resources (Part 1, 4.1, 5) may be especially helpful to continue the present conversation.

www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1930



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



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.¹ 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 BFC6².

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 Scripture³ and our Confession of Faith⁴ 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.⁵
- 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 assumed⁶ 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.⁷

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 assumed⁸ 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.

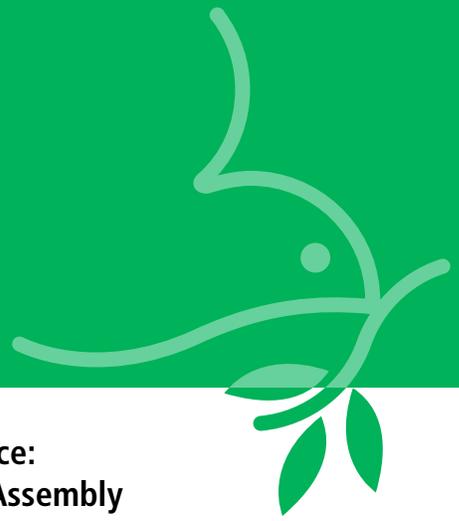
We pray again that in God’s grace and mercy, we can together forge our way ahead. The road may not be lit all the way to the horizon, but we do have enough light to move ahead, because we can see enough of the road to do so in confidence. We know that God is with us.

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

September , 2015

7 See footnote #5.

8 See footnote #6.



Being a Faithful Church (BFC) Task Force: Final Draft Recommendation for July, 2016 Assembly *As submitted to Canadian Mennonite, Dec. 14, 2015*

The final document of the BFC Task Force, including its four-part recommendation to the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly 2016, is now available for review and response. It has been sent to all Mennonite Church Canada congregations, and is available on the Mennonite Church Canada website.

The document is called ***“Being a Faithful Church 7: Summary and Recommendation on Sexuality 2009-2015.”*** The BFC Task Force believes that the following four-part recommendation accurately reflects the feedback from congregations over the 7 year process:

First, we affirm that 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 on page 8 in the Introduction of the *Confession* itself. (The *Confession* in that paragraph states that it serves the church as a guideline for the interpretation of Scripture, in providing guidance for belief and practice, in building a foundation for unity, as an outline for instruction and teaching, in updating interpretations of belief and practice, and in helping in the discussion of Mennonite belief and practice in the wider circle of faith.)

Second, 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 by the reading of Article 19 in our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

Third, we recommend that we create space/leave room within our Body to test alternative understandings from those of the larger Body to see if they are a prophetic nudging of the Spirit of God.

Fourth, 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.

The BFC Task Force is not requiring further responses to this recommendation before the Assembly in July, 2016. However, if there are further responses that you would like the BFC Task Force to hear before Assembly 2016, these are very welcome. Such feedback - received before February 15, 2016 - will be seriously considered in determining whether or not another draft of the Final Recommendation is required before Assembly 2016.

The BFC Task Force understands that its mandate and work will end at the Assembly 2016. Further processes needed beyond Assembly 2016 will be defined by the Mennonite Church Canada General Board.

Discernment and testing of divergent voices is the ongoing vocation of the church. As a Body, we have discerned that intentional space is needed over a longer period of time to “test” the differing voices that are among us. This path recognizes that at any given time there will likely be majority and minority understandings of key matters of Christian faith and practice. By recommending the need for “testing space,” our Body has expressed its confidence that God’s Spirit will be with us and will guide us. This confidence in the Spirit affirms that being like-minded and the exclusion of difference are not the only two alternatives for the Church. We can be united in our common quest for faithfulness even when different understandings arise. This does not mean that the whole Body approves every alternate understanding. It does mean that we are committed to provide more space within our national Church, our Area Churches, and congregations to test alternative understandings to see if they are a nudging of the Spirit of God. This work of creating space/leaving room within our Body to test alternative understanding will be done in the interface between the congregations and other levels of the church as suggested in the monitoring mechanism of this recommendation.”

The recommendation does not indicate exactly how such space would be created, nor how it would be monitored. These are determinations that take us beyond the mandate of the present Task Force. Neither does the recommendation suggest that all parts of the church would be obliged to do the same thing. The recommendation does assume, however, that differences will not easily divide us. We will continue to walk these paths of discernment together.

The Task Force invites all Mennonite Church Canada congregations and Area Churches to continue in fervent prayer, serious study, and respectful dialogue as we consider the recommendation before us. The Task Force also invites further responses if concerns or questions arise that require further consideration. These responses can be emailed to wmetzger@mennonitechurch.ca before February 15, 2016.