

The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ
Presented by the Faith and Life Committee
at the Annual Assembly in Edmonton (July 2006)

Naming the Issue

The Faith and Life Committee met for the first time in October 2005 to receive its mandate and to determine the criteria for selecting the issues that it would consider, and develop strategies for doing its work. The Committee developed the following guiding question with its clarifying preamble:

*As a people called into being by God
Who confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour*
And seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit
Who desire under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be
Rooted in Scripture
*Shaped by the life of the Church
Informed by its confessions and denominational statements
Who are a part of the church world wide
Located in the Canadian society in the twenty-first century*

What does it mean to be a faithful Mennonite Church?

Among the many issues generated and brought to our attention for immediate consideration was the need for biblical and theological reflection around a proposal that Mennonite Church Canada allow for area conference only membership (ACOM). The Committee set about requesting short papers on related topics to gain clarity on the issue. We met again at the end of February and at that time benefited from a day of consultation with the Reference Council, a group composed of Area Conference Ministers, Moderators, Secretaries, and representatives from our academic theological institutions.

It became apparent to us that the proposal for ACOM was motivated by a lingering sense of discomfort within some congregations toward Mennonite Church Canada in how we understand the authority of Scripture and the Confession of Faith, our stance toward homosexuality, and the role of leadership in MC Canada in ensuring compliance with officially approved positions. Some congregations have also felt that their concerns were not being heard.

On the basis of discussion, prayer and consultations we concluded that the most fundamental theological and biblical concern to be addressed in consideration of ACOM is the unity of Christians in the body of Christ. In subsequent discussions we have become increasingly aware that one of the prime reasons our unity is under stress is that we are needing to live with two crucial, positive sets of values that are in tension with each other—namely, on the one hand, desiring to be people concerned about holiness and integrity, and on the other hand, desiring to be people who live out God’s gracious inclusive hospitality. As we have discerned together, the conviction has grown among us that whatever we do with the request for ACOM, we cannot lose sight of the biblical declaration that the unity of Christians in the body of Christ is a given and not something which we take or leave as we wish. As we manage the tension between holiness and hospitality, and deal with the other issues and concerns that challenge us, we must do so in light of Christ’s plea that we may all be one (John 17:21).

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What binds us together?

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:13-14, 21-22)

As a Mennonite Church we have often found unity in historical, cultural and theological factors. As cultural and historical commonalities have fallen away, schools, periodicals, Sunday School curricula, worship resources, hymnbooks, a Confession of Faith and a leadership polity have all played a role in fortifying our sense of unity. While there is no doubt that nurturing ideological agreement and joining together in Kingdom work for pragmatic reasons has contributed to holding us together, this is not yet the unity of Christ that binds us.

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.

You might be able to pick your friends, but you cannot choose who you want as siblings in your family. Likewise, as God's adopted children it is not our prerogative to select our siblings. The question is not whether the family has been formed into one body by one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, but whether the unity bestowed will be claimed and celebrated (Eph. 4).

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). "The unity we experience in our diversity is not a consequence of our adaptability, our tolerance, our magnanimity, our inclusiveness. It is a miracle of grace."¹ We are chained together in peace by Christ through his death on the cross (Eph. 4:3).

Is organizational unity and unity in Christ synonymous?

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:36-41)

¹ Tom Yoder Neufeld, "Christ our peace has made us one," July 9, 2003. Mennonite Church, Canada, Minister's Conference, St. Catharines, ON, p. 10.

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We propose, although with some caution, that organizational unity and unity in Christ are not synonymous. We do so with caution, recognizing our failures as Protestants and Mennonites, who have often been too willing to divide the church. We have too often dealt with our differences and disagreements by turning our back to the other. Our identity as Mennonites often has been determined by our separation from other brothers and sisters with whom we disagree and not by unity with them. Such a posture is not in keeping with the heart of Christ and we need to repent of it, not bless it.

And yet it is the case that organizational unity and unity in Christ are not synonymous. Organizational unity is our choice, while unity in Christ is God's doing. We recognize that our unity in Christ can and must work itself out in different organizational structures. We cannot all be part of the same conference. Inevitably, we will find ourselves better able to work with some Christians than with others, because of reasons of geography, cultural identity, theological understandings and historical ties. Even so, unity in Christ is not just an abstract idea; it must take concrete form in fellowship, service, mission, prayer, worship and sharing of resources. But when we are not united in organization, what does it mean to remain meaningfully united in Christ?

The apostle Paul's relationship with Barnabas is instructive. In the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas are united in their work and efforts, but when they prepare for their second journey, Paul refuses to take along John Mark, who failed them on the earlier trip. The conflict between Paul and Barnabas is so sharp that they part company believing that in God's kingdom they can work more effectively apart than together. Yet, it is instructive that there is a memory within the Church that Mark returned to be a fellow worker with Paul (2 Timothy 4:11). Assuming that this is the same John Mark that we meet in Acts, what actions and attitudes did Barnabas and Paul nurture that allowed for subsequent reconciliation to occur?

When we choose not to maintain organizational unity, we need to think carefully about how we continue to nurture the unity that God has established through the death of Christ on the cross.

When does diversity destroy the unity of Christ?

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin... Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him... Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning... Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness." (*1 John 2:1a, 3-5, 7a, 9-11*)

The theme of unity in Christ can also be understood as a polarity with diversity/hospitality on one end and uniformity/holiness on the other. At the one pole, hospitality, at its best, is a key Christian value. It represents all that is good about being open to the outsider in our midst, living out God's invitation to live in a welcoming manner, humbly with those around us. At the other pole is another key Christian value, holiness or purity, which at its best depends on strength of faith and right relationship with God and recommends that we draw our boundaries clearly in order to ensure that the identity of our faith and our group remains coherent and strong.

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The problem is this: When we concern ourselves only with holiness, we become rigid and inward looking. Very likely, we make an idol out of our purity. When we concern ourselves only with hospitality, however, we lose our sense of who we are -- we become so open to others, we lose the language of our own faith, our attitudes and beliefs become ambiguous and at worst, we no longer know why we are Christians or what holds us together. Both holiness and hospitality can become a problem if we pay attention to one at the exclusion of the other.

Another way of speaking about this is that hospitality destroys the unity of Christ when we become so focused on being open that we lose our sense of identity – we lose our Christian faith. Likewise, we destroy the unity of Christ when we focus too heavily on purity. When we make an idol of purity, it is our purity that we worship and not God. The text from 1 John presents these two values in terms of obeying Christ's commandments and loving the brother and sister. We are invited to live in the tension that is created by holding both of these values – hospitality and holiness – together at the same time.

It bears acknowledging that as congregations in MC Canada we have used the values at these two poles in ways that have hurt one another. Those who have been intent on maintaining purity have felt hurt by those open and welcoming to homosexuals. Likewise, those who have been intent on being open and welcoming have felt hurt by those who have been intent on maintaining purity. Perhaps we have not known how to hold these two values together. Perhaps we have not seen that holiness and hospitality are as necessary to one another as exhaling and inhaling are. Perhaps we must confess that our struggle to live faithfully has challenged us and, to a degree, has broken us, and that as a church we still see through a glass dimly (1 Cor. 13.12).

How are we mutually accountable in the body of Christ?

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name..." Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. (Acts 15: 12-14, 19-21)

Influenced by our contemporary individualistic society, accountability does not sit well with us, in spite of the fact that it is a well-founded biblical admonition. The Apostle Paul's use of the metaphor of the body for the Church encourages an appreciation of diverse gifts, but also speaks to the matter of mutual accountability. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). As Christ's body we are joined and God expects us to work as one organic unit. The Anabaptist celebration of the Lord's Supper with its call for appropriate preparation and frequent citing of Matthew 5:23-24 sounds a similar refrain. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Within our Mennonite theology we have made use of the biblical concept and practice of covenanting membership when we talk about mutual accountability. As members in the local congregation, we promise to give and receive counsel, to live and to share in the bonds (chains) of Christian fellowship. Our area and national Conferences invite us to do the same on various congregational and conference

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levels. Our conference organizations should not be seen as just convenient, pragmatic ways of doing business, but as forums for congregations to be accountable one to the other in covenanting membership.

The reality, of course, is that we choose to form membership covenants with some individuals and congregations and not with others. In some cases we are in a covenantal relationship that is not of our choice. Even so, given the importance of the biblical admonition regarding mutual accountability, we must open ourselves to be accountable also to those with whom we do not covenant in formal membership, and perhaps even with whom we disagree in profound ways.

The story of the Jerusalem consultation found in Acts 15 describes how the Church set about binding and loosing, agreeing to give space while still insisting on certain levels of accountability. Being accountable can take different forms within the Church. In Acts 15 the disciples were able to find their way ahead by focusing on their mission. Once their mission was clear (extending the love of Christ to Gentiles) they could decide the circumcision question based on whether or not this aided or distracted from the mission. If ACOM becomes a possibility and we agree to give more space in our covenanting if it is desired, how will we continue to practice the biblical admonition to be mutually accountable?