

Polity in Mennonite Church Canada How did we get to where we are?

The formation of Mennonite Church Canada was precipitated by conversations that took place in 1989 between the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) and the Mennonite Church (MC)--North American conferences that were interested in coming together into one integrated body. Conversations also included the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC), which had congregational and conference connections to these North American bodies. The polities between the two conferences were not identical, so any discussion about integration would have to come to terms with the differences. The Mennonite Church saw itself as a conference of conferences (or a church of area churches) in which congregations related to the North American body through its membership in an area conference. Under this arrangement constituent congregations sent delegates to their area conference, not to the North American body. Somewhat differently, the General Conference saw itself primarily as a conference of congregations. Under this arrangement congregations were able to choose their level of conference participation, which meant that they could theoretically relate to any one conference body, or they could relate to two or three conferences. In Canada, most GC congregations maintained a formal relationship with all three conferences—their area conference, the CMC and the General Conference.

With the formation of Mennonite Church Canada in 1999, the two differing polities were considered and then integrated in various ways. Mennonite Church Canada now understood itself as a church of area churches and of the congregations in their area (not simply a conference of congregations nor simply as a conference of area conferences). Some of the delegates to MC Canada annual assemblies were chosen by the area conference, and some (the majority) by the congregations. This brought together both MC and GC models, even though formally only area conferences could join the national body. Thus congregations attained membership in MC Canada through their membership in an area conference. Membership in MC Canada entitled area conferences to send delegates to a delegate assembly and to participate in programs and receive services from MC Canada. Constituent congregations could also send delegates to a delegate assembly, and they could directly participate in programs and receive services from MC Canada.

Was the polity that Mennonite Church Canada adopted the right one? Pragmatic as well as theological considerations led to the present arrangement. Under the old framework, congregations in Canada were demanding that the conferences streamline their structures and programs. At various conference levels there was confusion about accountability, especially as it pertained to credentialing and ordination. The CMC congregations were relating to three different conference programs, but seemed no longer willing--or able--to support conference programs at multiple levels. In Ontario and Quebec integration realities meant that congregations were being asked to join four conferences, and for many with an MC background, being connected to so many conference structures was bewildering. Likewise, younger ethnic churches across the country, while signalling a desire to relate to the larger Mennonite church, were confused, even overwhelmed, by the prospect of relating to various church bodies. The new polity arrangement in this context was clearly intended to streamline and simplify conference structures and respond to the various concerns.

While pragmatic reasons were at the forefront, theological considerations were also noted. Increasingly “church” was being viewed not only as a fellowship that meets locally, but also a Christian community that gathers regionally, nationally, and

March 19, 2007

Page 2

worldwide. This conviction was understood to be consonant with Biblical teaching, confessional statements, and in line with historical understandings within the Mennonite tradition. The name change from “conference” to “church” at the national level (from CMC to MC Canada), and the name changes that took place at regional levels were a natural outcome of these insights as well as the result of revisions in polity.