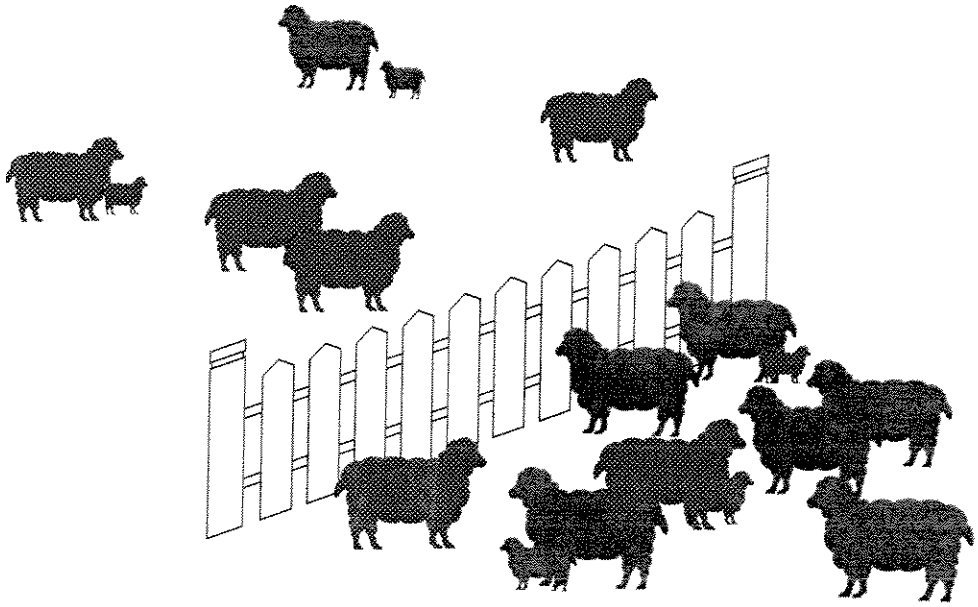
An indispensable tool for pastors, deacons, elders, church council members, conference workers, mission workers, and anyone in pastoral ministries in Mennonite churches in North America.

NAMING THE SHEEP

Understanding Church Membership



Voices in dialogue

produced by the Resources Commission
Conference of Mennonites in Canada

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Foreword

What does it mean to belong to a Christian *Mennonite* church? This is the foundational question addressed by this resource that is in your hands.

This question, of course, raises many others. Are there requirements for membership? What are these? Is it possible to move from membership to non-membership? How? What is the relationship between individual need and the welfare of the community? Is requirement for membership primarily doctrinal or behavioural? Is membership determined by personal choice or by communal authority? Is church membership a responsibility, or is it a right? What is the rightful role of children in a church that emphasises adult membership?

These questions, in turn, lead us to the heart of the church's life and practice. What do worship and baptism and communion mean? How are these practices related to membership? Is it necessary and possible to keep each other accountable? What are the criteria that guide these processes?

Ultimately, these questions urge us to reflect on the foundational premises that inspire us to think about these things in the first place. Is the Bible our guide to faith and practice? If so, how can it be interpreted with sufficient clarity to accomplish this guidance? What is the role of tradition and history in answering these critical questions? Is history a guide, or is it a map? Is tradition more authoritative than contemporary expression?

The Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, upon hearing many voices requesting that the meaning of church membership be discussed, developed an extensive questionnaire (cf. Appendix I). Over one hundred conference congregations returned the forms. We then asked other voices to reflect on the results of this questionnaire. We are pleased to make these reflections available to our congregations for scrutiny, reflection, study, direction, and inspiration.

This compilation does not mean that all voices have been heard. Nor does it pretend that these voices are representative of all regions and inclinations. We did, however, attempt to get a mix of voices: from each region, from each church academic institution, from both genders, and from people with pastoral and academic expertise. This resource is a serious attempt to connect a contemporary pastoral concern with academic reflection.

We did not attempt to develop a seamless and coherent argument about church membership in order to move the church toward a predetermined direction. Neither do we pretend, with this resource, to articulate an "official" conference position on church membership. Rather, we want to provide a resource that looks seriously at the issues involved. The authors are, without exception, persons with significant academic and/or pastoral experience. Each one speaks from a perspective of personal involvement and concern for the issues at hand. Our prayer is that God may use this resource for the building of the church in Canada and that this resource will encourage us in each congregation

to reflect seriously about what it means to strengthen and empower the church of Jesus Christ in Canada.

Robert J. Suderman
Executive Secretary, Resources Commission, Conference of Mennonites in Canada
15 June 1997

Robert J. Suderman

The Grand Design: The Church in the New Testament

Two stories are on my desk at the time of writing. One concerns a Mennonite congregation that, after years of conflict with a lay minister, decided to move toward reconciliation, forgiveness, and a reconsideration of its plan to withdraw the credentials of the minister. The other concerns a Presbyterian pastor who is moving toward excommunicating his entire denomination, given that he feels the church has not treated him or his family fairly during a recent crisis. It is striking that these two cases would come to my desk on the same morning. They demonstrate some common elements.

Both cases assume that being the church implies accountability. In the first case, the church holds its member, even its pastor, accountable. In the second, the church is held accountable by one of its members. Both assume that membership in the church is serious business. Both believe that due process must be followed. Both presuppose that responsibilities and rights are inter-connected. Both attempt to draw boundaries: being the church cannot mean everything to all people even though it is meant to draw all people to itself.

It is noteworthy that these two stories come out of very distinct traditions. The Anabaptists, in the sixteenth century, declared the official church of its time no longer to be the true church. The official church had lost its credibility and therefore its authority, they said. The Presbyterian (Reform) tradition, in turn, persecuted the Anabaptists for their heresies. The tables were turned: The Anabaptists, in a sense, excommunicated the official church, while the Reform tradition (Presbyterian) excommunicated its Anabaptist members. Both traditions were concerned about doctrinal orthodoxy, ethical conformity, and political correctness.

Orthodoxy? Excommunication? Conformity? Heresy? Accountability? These are not everyday words in our world that encourages diversity and relativizes orthodoxy. Our pluralistic world teaches us to be tolerant and inclusive and to shy away from distinctives that might exclude. Our post-modern world teaches us to focus on what is local; to commit ourselves to what is relative; to enjoy what is partial. It is distrustful of 'the big picture' and suspicious of over-arching systems. It is more comfortable with 'random acts of kindness' than with systemic 'principles of mercy'; it directs our attention to the micro worlds of compassion rather than to the macro worlds of justice. It encourages us "to think locally but to act globally."

What does it mean to be the church in our context? Certainly, the church would never deny the importance of the immediate, the local, the partial, and the micro worlds

in which we live. The church's ministry is defined in these terms. Yet the church cannot forget about the macro framework, 'the kingdom of God,' the historical sweep of salvation history, the universal task of ministry, and the attempt to "*unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth*" (Ephesians 1:10). With the Biblical testimony as its foundation, the church hopes to promote those roads that encourage life under God's rule. Yet, history, even church history, demonstrates that many roads lead to destruction and death. Careful discernment is necessary; not all 'spirits' are from God. The church finds it impossible to ignore the over-arching framework. The 'big picture', i.e., God's universal reign, defines the church and determines its direction. To proclaim that God is creator is to declare that our place under God's rule has universal implications. The church must plug into this global rule of God.

It is, therefore, important to ask again what it means to be the church, and how the church is to consider the meaning of membership. The essays in this volume demonstrate that these questions are not easy ones. The authors have grappled with various dimensions of these questions. I wish to provide a broad overview of the New Testament witness about what it means to be the church. This witness is both invigorating and sobering as we contemplate our own perspectives about the meaning of church membership.

Ninety-six ways to be the church

What does it mean to be the church? Paul Minear, now retired professor from Yale University, set out to answer that question. Using the New Testament as his guide, he discovered 96 images that talk about what it means to be the church (cf. *Images of Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975). What a banquet of meaning! What a menu of nourishment! Minear focuses not only on the variations on this menu of metaphors but also demonstrates how they are interconnected. It is difficult, for example, to talk about the church as *the new creation* without also talking about the church as *the new humanity*, or the *first fruits*, or the *royal priesthood*. To talk about the church as the *body* is impossible without also talking about it as the *temple*. Imagine, 96 images to try to communicate to the reader what it means to be the church! How dry and unimaginative our efforts seem at times when compared to the creative attempts by the New Testament authors to communicate the wealth of meaning of being the church.

The church is a *boat*, a *bride*, and a *temple*. It is a *lamp*, a *chosen nation*, and a *field*. The church is an *open letter*, a *flock*, and an *aroma*. It is a *virgin* and an *ambassador*. These are only eleven of the word pictures the New Testament authors use to talk about the church. With these pictures they attempt to communicate not only the shape of the church, but its purpose, its desire, its strategy, and its soul. The church as a *body* says one thing, the church as *salt* and *light* says something else (or does it?). The church as a *public letter* says one thing, the church as a *lamb* or as an *exile* says something else (or does it?).

It is interesting that in spite of the wealth of metaphor in the New Testament communicating the nature of the church, one looks in vain for a precise definition, an authoritative shape, one given organization or structure. This lack of precision can be disconcerting for those wishing to defend and justify one and only one notion of *church*. We note two temptations in responding to this smorgasbord of images, both readily apparent in our century. One is the limiting response: "I'll choose one or two of the 96 and build my church on those. It's just too big and confusing to try to do it any other way." The other temptation is the relativizing response: "If the church can be defined by using 96 varied images, then there must be another 96 that are equally legitimate. I'll create my own image, and define it in the way I prefer." Whereas the first temptation leads to the fossilization of structures and understanding and a fear of learning more, the second one leads to fluidity in which there is no shape, thereby putting the church beyond critique or careful discernment.

A closer look at the 96 images of the church demonstrates that the church is meant to be neither fossil nor shapeless. The genius of the 96 images is that imagination does not contradict careful definition and discernment. Let me explain.

There is no one dominant image of the church in the New Testament. This fact serves to enhance the importance of each image. There is no unimportant image of the church in the New Testament. Although it is true that the images unveil a certain fluidity in the definition of the church, it is not true that these definitions contradict each other or move in different directions. There is fluidity as well as congruency; many images are interwoven, they build on each other; in some cases they are reciprocal.

When each image is studied separately, it is apparent that none points simply to itself. They all point beyond their own meanings to something greater. This is the nature of metaphor. Thus, each image increases the importance of the other, because it provides greater insight into that which both point to.

The images are not meant to be isolated. While each one deserves special attention, the full glory of the individual images is brought out in the synoptic, composite understanding of them all together.

The New Testament writers, without exception, understand the church to be a community of believers continually guided by the Spirit of Jesus toward greater knowledge of and commitment to the purpose of Jesus. None of the images contradicts this larger purpose. All of the images attempt to communicate this intention.

Each image ties the purpose of Jesus to the larger purpose of God's activity in human history. The word often used to identify this purposeful movement of God in history is the word 'eschatology.' Each of the images is rooted in God's history and imagines the church as an instrument to move that history forward. The church, reflecting this purpose, is thus presented as an eschatological community.

The wealth of images is not meant to water down, pluralize, or relativize the importance of the individual parts, but is designed to enhance each part. Each image and the

entire system of images are designed to create greater awareness and imagination of what a people, faithful to the eternal purposes of God in history, might look like and might do. The church is most faithful when it tries to understand and implement what each image points to. The church is least faithful when it uses the abundance of images to justify its inactivity or when it uses the multiplicity of images to pretend that it doesn't matter much what any one in particular wishes to communicate.

The system of images takes for granted that the Holy Spirit is the permanent guest of the church. It is this Spirit of God that gifts the church for ministry, educates it for discernment, empowers it for resistance, and nourishes it for discipleship to Jesus. The images also assume that the Holy Spirit, as a permanent guest, has access to and is welcome in all of the rooms that make up the church (the temple of God). The Spirit is welcome in our boardrooms and bedrooms; it is welcome in our bank accounts and in our recreational activities. The church's ministry of hospitality is extended first and foremost to the Holy Spirit, opening all doors and discussions to this presence. Because of the hospitality extended to the Holy Spirit, the church feels comfortable extending the same hospitality to others seeking relationships and direction.

Perhaps we need two more reminders. First, we must remember that the New Testament use of images and metaphors to talk about the church is an inspired use of human language. Ultimately we are trying to understand the mystery of God creatively expressed in human language. The New Testament writers are so thrilled about uncovering some of the mystery of God's will for the church that they use language freely as the instrument to communicate this excitement to the readers. This language is useful to us as readers only insofar as we attempt to connect with the cause of the excitement that produced it in the first place. To recapture the cause of the excitement is to recapture a grand design for ministry. The church, as God's people and as the prolonged presence of Jesus on earth, is depicted as a vital instrument to promote God's justice, compassion, grace, and salvation to the world. No wonder the New Testament writers left no stone unturned in their attempts to communicate this important task to the church. The images for the church in the New Testament were chosen for the purpose of propelling God's people to mission and ministry and thereby making available to others the same grace that God had shared with them.

The second reminder is more sobering. Images and metaphors can be misused. Minear graciously states that "...an image does not remain the same when used to achieve an alien objective" (p. 225).

This, we realize, is an understatement. When the objective is *alien* the image changes, i.e., the same image can mean different things when it is used for differing objectives. We have too many examples of this truth: the cult in Los Angeles using the image of *Heaven's Gate* as a justification for mass suicide; militia movements using the *People of God* image as an excuse for white supremacy racism; the use of the *Holy Nation* image to justify the massacre of Moslems during the time of the Crusades; the *Army*

of God image to defend the conquest of Latin America and the slaughter of millions of aboriginal people. Yes, we are aware that the nature of the images changes when they are used for alien objectives. Neither the images nor the objectives they point to are shapeless. Both are purposeful. There is coherence and authority in the midst of creativity and imagination.

Ironically, the best guard against the misuse of images is the proper functioning of the truth that they point to. That is, when the church properly functions as the church, then the discernment of the Spirit will militate against the misuse of the images that define it. That continues to be our challenge as we discern what it means to be the *Mennonite* church in Canada in the twenty-first century.

PAUL BERGEN

All Things in Order: A Modest Proposal for Reframing Baptism and Membership

Talk around the table

It was a lively discussion. Seated around the table were a number of individuals invited together to comment on the baptism/membership/communion survey which each had responded to in writing. We began on page one of the survey and did not travel far beyond. "Why does baptism automatically lead to membership?" asked one. "Yes," responded another. "I have always thought of my own baptism as a statement of my faith at the time. It had very little to do with membership." "But you were baptized *into* Christ and Christ's *body*," contributed a third. "And the church is the visible manifestation of that body. You cannot be baptized and not be a member of a church." "But why can't one simply be a 'member' of the church universal?" asked yet another.[1]

And so it went. By the end of the first evening's discussion, it was clear that we had found in baptism and membership an inexhaustible source of question, concern, and emotion. It was clear, too, that underlying much of this animated discussion was a host of assumptions about discipleship, life in Christian community, the place and value of ritual, and the simple realities of human nature. My goal in this paper is to reflect on baptism and membership from the perspective of how they are understood and undertaken in the congregation and to offer ideas as to how we might, in practical ways, enhance our experiences with each. My pastoral concern is to restore to each the spiritual significance with which we claim to invest it, and which baptismal candidates and those seeking membership both desire and expect.

Some concerns

"Do I *have* to become a member when I am baptized?" This question has been posed to me (and to many pastors, I suspect) in numerous pre-baptismal classes. Underlying it are several important concerns. First, those of high school and young adult age do not always feel prepared to commit themselves to membership because of perceptions of expecta-

tions, especially as they relate to time and money. They do not think themselves able to practice membership in the congregation to the same extent as do their parents or other adult models. Nor may they wish to. Differentiating themselves from the faith beliefs and practices of their parents may require them to think about doing things differently, even if it means questioning some of what is seen to be happening in the congregation relative to membership and its expectations.

A second concern relates to an understanding of what baptism itself means, signifies, or accomplishes. Our particular Christian tradition has instilled in us a strong sense that baptism is primarily a statement of an individual's faith. It is that time in one's life when one publically confesses how the gracious love of God has been experienced through an encounter with the living Lord, followed by profession of a desire to submit to that lordship throughout the remainder of life. It is a very public expression of what often has been a very personal, private and deeply meaningful experience. It is filled with anticipation and trepidation: what will happen in this?; what am I doing here?; am I really ready for this?; am I worthy of this?; what is God going to do with me now? It is a profoundly spiritual event, well able to evoke a flood of emotional response not only from those being baptized but also from all who participate through their presence.

Why, it is therefore asked, should a time of such meaningful encounter with God be diluted by including concerns about our future encounters with one another? Why is it necessary to dampen celebration of a spiritual high point with thoughts of the more mundane aspects of Christian life such as frequency of attendance, participation on committees, and expected levels of financial giving? Does not such a shift threaten to diminish or even trivialize what has already happened?

Third, how does one reconcile what is taught about the regenerate life of the baptized believer with what is seen in practice in the congregation? Over a period of time, the critical eyes and ears of those who have grown up as "children of the church" have been alert to inconsistencies. They wonder how it can be that some who claim membership are so rarely in evidence during worship, or why no one seems to be doing anything about a member whose lifestyle does not appear to conform to biblical standards, or why the congregation seems to pray so seldom, or why questions about issues of faith and life are dealt with as they are, or why power and politics play such a role in Christian community, or why worship "celebrations" seem anything but celebrative? Enquiring minds are concerned by such inconsistencies. They may be very uneasy about binding themselves to this very imperfect manifestation of the body of Christ. And they may therefore be concerned about participating in rites that automatically and necessarily make them part of this same group about which they have so many critical questions.

This list obviously does not exhaust the possibilities. It does, however, give some indication of the range and depth of concerns expressed by those who wonder about baptism and membership. More immediately, it gives some context for the response which I am about to offer here.

Watching God at work

I'll begin by suggesting two fundamental beliefs about the church which impinge upon our understanding and practice of baptism and membership. First, our new Confession of Faith declares that the church is a community of those who have chosen to accept "God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."[2] We are the communion of saints who acknowledge the bounty of God's redeeming grace in our lives by undergoing water baptism. In baptism, we acknowledge through symbol and sign the fact that God has accomplished some work of grace in a person's life. God's love has broken through. God's acceptance has in some way been experienced. God's adoption of this individual into the family of God has been realized. In baptism we celebrate what God has done and is doing in the life of the believer.

In Acts chapter 10, Peter authorized just such a celebration. After seeing evidence of God's work in the lives of those before him, he asked "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized?" (v. 47). As congregations, we need to be prepared to make this a primary question for ourselves as we bear witness to God's work in the life of an individual standing before us seeking baptism. The New Testament witness is clear: God can and will work in a variety of ways. After Peter's impassioned message to the people of Jerusalem in Acts 2, God moved thousands to "repent and be baptized" at that very moment and place. Saul had three days of blindness in which to think about how best to respond to his encounter with the risen Christ. Others, like Timothy, were nurtured by parents and other mentors for years. We see God doing similiar works of grace with individuals in our own congregations, sometimes in spite of the rigorous programs of instruction and preparation we have developed. In light of biblical precedents, we need to ask ourselves whether we are willing to relinquish to God's Spirit some of the control we prefer to exert over who is an acceptable candidate for baptism.[3] Can we give ourselves permission to stand back and allow God to work such that, if a person comes to us and wants to test whether he is being called to receive baptism by undertaking a time of study and reflection with us, we can do just so with glad and thankful hearts. And if another comes to us leaping with joy because God's Spirit has touched her and she wants to celebrate her newfound life in Christ with baptism, we can let the waters flow and rejoice with her. The report of God's working in the lives of mere mortals is this: "Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b). Perhaps it is not inappropriate for us to consider how we might best get out of God's way.

Naming the church first as the "assembly of those who have accepted God's offer of salvation" has consequences for our perspective on membership at this point. Baptism into Christ necessarily means incorporation "into Christ's body on earth, the church."[4] If we accept the premise that this church is "the society of believers from many nations" and that it is therefore far greater than any single congregation or denomination, then perhaps we might also begin to conceive of our baptism into Christ as incorporation into

the *universal* body of Christ which boasts no "divisions between nations, races, classes and genders."[5] By virtue of who Christ is and what Christ has accomplished, we are baptized into an entity that has, at this moment in history, no visible or unified structure. We are not baptized into the Mennonite Church or any other religious organization constrained by boundaries which we have imposed. Nor do we claim to be. We assume ourselves to be baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ universal, the *true* catholic church. Congregational and denominational policies could probably better reflect this reality.

At the same time, a second fundamental belief about the church must be taken into account. If baptism is truly a pledge to "walk in the way of Jesus Christ" (p 46) and hence to grow into Christ-likeness as faithful disciples, then the body into which one has been baptized must in some way function as a companion on that journey and an agent of that growth. The church must become a community of disciples, heeding Jesus's command in Matthew 28:20 not only to *be* disciples but to *make* disciples.

Within this discipling community, baptism signals a moment of decision. The act announces our "yes" to God. It declares our desire to live in faithful obedience to the nudges and tugs that signal God's call to us. Baptism is an act to which we consciously and freely submit ourselves and through which we make a commitment to living and growing in a particular way. In baptism, we become "membered" onto the body of Christ, grafted into the vine which is Jesus Christ. (John 15) As integral members, we must accept and grow into the reality that we are now connected to this body such that we are also connected to its other members, especially those members beside whom we worship and work. We have become part of something which is bigger than the individual and is more tangible than the universal body of Christ. We are connected with others and find both meaning and fulfillment in our commitment to live and share with fellow believers in the "bonds of Christian fellowship, giving and receiving Christian love, sharing and bearing one another's joy and pain."[6]

However, we recognize that there may be stages through which one grows on the path of discipleship. The story of the developing New Testament church is also a story of those who "grow up" in their faith. For example, the Gospels depict the disciples as a group of individuals who ride a roller-coaster of belief and unbelief, travelling to the heights of faith and action (confessing Jesus as Christ; going out with confidence to preach and to heal) before crashing down to the depths of denial and paralysis (Peter's denial; the group's fearful post-crucifixion "exile" in a home). It is not until the power of God's Spirit is unleashed upon them that this group is enabled to minister in Jesus's name with confidence and authority.

Other New Testament writers acknowledge through their letters that their readers are at different stages in their walk of discipleship. Some are new to the faith and are thus described as "infants in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:2). Others have not yet arrived at the point where they are able to critically and biblically assess actions such as the consump-

tion of meat offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8). Some have returned to previous ways of thinking or acting and must again be fed with the "milk" of the Word rather than with "solid food" (Hebrews 5:12–14). And all are encouraged to "long for the pure, spiritual milk" so that by it they might grow into salvation over the course of a life-time of faithful discipleship (1 Peter 2:2).

These texts remind us that no two believers are at the same stage of growth or maturity in their faith. They remind us, too, that it is legitimate to hold different expectations of those who are at these different levels, nurturing "infants" differently than those who are on "solid food." It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that our practices should reflect these realities.

As a consequence...

Having attempted to state both concerns and ideals, allow me to put to paper some ideas that flow as a consequence.

1. Place baptism in God's hands and let us become agents rather than directors. It is not our place to judge whether or to what extent God has been at work in a person's life. It *is* our place, however, to walk alongside such a person with prayer and thanksgiving.
2. Offer alternatives. To say to someone that "this is the way we do things here" may be to miss an opportunity to witness God's Spirit at work in a new and vital way. The New Testament story clearly reveals a variety of personal and spiritual needs that could be met in different ways. Why assume that so much has changed? For some, the need to thoroughly process and ponder an act as profound as baptism can be met only through a period of study, reflection, and prayer in advance of the act. We must provide meaningful pre-baptismal classes that seek to address that need. For others, a Spirit-given moment of "AHA!" demands a much more immediate action for the baptism to have the meaning that it should. We must strive to "listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches," expecting that that message may not be precisely the same for every person who comes to us seeking baptism.
3. Celebrate baptism as an expression and act of faith. Invest it with due significance as an essential marker on the journey, one that designates the official public beginning of one's walk with God in Christ. Make provision to continue walking with the newly baptized by identifying a mentor from within the congregation whose task it would be to assist with growth in spiritual disciplines and learning about how the congregation functions as a body.
4. Celebrate baptism as a true "membering" onto the body of Christ. We confess that the church of Jesus Christ extends beyond our doors, beyond our community, beyond our nation, and beyond our denomination. It is "the society of believers from many nations."[7] It includes those whom we have baptized and those who come into our faith community from elsewhere. While no tangible means of indicating membership in the "holy catholic/universal church" may currently exist such that every Christian de-

nomination will recognize the baptism of every other (a sure sign that "God isn't finished with us yet"!), perhaps we can contribute some leaven to the mix by stating, without equivocation or qualification, that the newly baptized are "incorporated into Christ's body on earth, the church."[8]

5. Celebrate the resulting connectedness between the newly baptized and the baptizing community. The local church will always be the most immediate and accessible manifestation of the "body of Christ," and hence it is always into that body that one is baptized. Consider the newly baptized as an initiate into the community of the redeemed, and make a commitment to him or her to a period of growth through study, practice, spiritual friendship, retreat, identification of spiritual gifts, etc. Plan to wait with moving on to the next step until sufficient time has passed to ascertain readiness.
6. Plan to respond differently to different levels of development (and to celebrate each step or stage!). That might mean making provision for different stages (or levels) of membership corresponding to different levels of development or spiritual maturity. It certainly means deliberately identifying, marking, and celebrating each of the milestones along the way.
7. In all members nurture the expectation that discipleship necessarily entails life-long learning and growth. The "perfection of Christ" is an end-point that no living person can ever achieve, and hence growth into Christ-likeness is a process that will not end until life ends. We are constantly making and being made into disciples, processes which require the presence and participation of other believers in our lives. We need each other to help test the Spirit and to hold each other to account, to set goals and to monitor our growth. Perhaps the ideas of covenant and renewal can help us to better focus on our growth in discipleship.

A modest proposal...

Based on these suggestions, an outline of a model composed of six components begins to take shape in my mind.[9]

1. Pre-baptismal activity
   a) Preparation or instruction
      – intended for those who desire to explore their faith in a structured and deliberate way prior to deciding about baptism.
      – format and content should be determined based on needs and interests of participants.
   b) Upon learning of a "conversion experience"
      – gather a spiritual care group (deacons, pastoral team, small group, whatever) to hear the individual's faith story and to help discern whether baptism should be undertaken.
2. Baptism
   – celebrate as an expression of faith.

– mark this as a "new beginning" in the person's journey of faith.
– convey welcome as a member in the universal Church of Jesus Christ.

3. Post-baptism: "testing the waters"[10]
   – allow for a period of initiation that might include:
   – pairing with a mentor from the congregation[11];
   – training in spiritual disciplines[12];
   – identification of spiritual gifts and ways of employing those gifts[13];
   – learning structures and practices of the congregation;
   – practicing the "giving and receiving of counsel" through interaction with a small group; or
   – learning about denominational affliliations.
   – invite reflection as to readiness to move on to the next step.
4. *Discipling* Covenant
   – become "membered" to a particular congregation by committing to a covenant of discipleship drawn up within that congregation.
   – this covenant would attempt to describe actions to be undertaken in the next step.
5. Active Discipling
   – A time during which the believer works towards goals or objectives identified in the covenanting process.
   – These might include activities such as:
   – participation in a spiritual friendship relationship[14];
   – service on a committee, board or commission[15]; or
   – participation in a small group[16].
   – They might also include objectives relative to mission or service work and to stewardship.[17]
   – Near the end of this time, each person should undertake a review of her/his spiritual life with a pastor, deacon, care group leader, or other appropriate person, modifying goals and objectives for the next period as appropriate.[18]
6. Covenant Renewal
   – at the end of a pre-determined time, or at a pre-determined point in the year, invite all participants in the congregation to renew their commitment or to enter into covenant for the first time.

In conclusion

I wish to express my thanks to the Resources Commission for inviting me to participate in this dialogue. It has been both exhilarating and challenging to reflect on the practical, theoretical, and theological aspects of these two components of life as disciples in Christian community. I pray that this has been a helpful addition to the ongoing dialogue within our denomination.

Notes

[1] I would like to gratefully acknowledge the thoughtful and spirited contributions of the participants of two such meetings: Deb Baergen, Lorne Buhr, Kathryn Friesen, Marvin Lesser, Ernie Wieler, Jan Wilhelm & Carolyn Wilson.

[2] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), p. 39.

[3] Our terminology betrays us when it comes to determining who exerts the control in baptism. By saddling this rite with the name "ordinance" (or that activity by which we give or bring order to our church structure), I wonder if we haven't simply replaced one dysfunctional view of baptism (i.e. the Reformation's use of the church to bring order to the state by registering infant citizens at baptism) with another (ordering our congregational structure by using baptism as the "ticket" into the membership roll).

[4] *Confession*, p. 46.

[5] *Confession*, p. 39.

[6] Heinz and Dorothea Janzen, *Ministers Manual* (Faith and Life Press, 1983), p. 27. This is one of three questions put to persons seeking membership by transfer. Another way of thinking about our commitment to other believers in the household of faith involves use of the various Pauline texts that speak of actions to or for "one another."

[7] *Confession*, p. 39.

[8] *Confession*, p. 46.

[9] Note that this model and the suggestions upon which it is based are not derived from current practice in our congregation. Other congregations may already utilize more of this model than do we. I include it for the purpose of discussing possibilities.

[10] Note that the titles suggested here are not in final form. They can and will change with any specific application.

[11] An outline of activities is suggested in Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, Press, 1989), pp. 104ff. This pairing with a mentor might logically happen for some in pre-baptismal step #1.

[12] See Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* for an overview of the possibilities.

[13] A sample "spiritual gifts inventory" can be found in Carol Shanks, "Spiritual Gifts Inventories: Closing the Information–Application Gap," *Net Results* (February, 1997, Vol XVIII, No. 2), pp. 1–9.

[14] See Wendy Miller, *Learning to Listen: A Guide for Spiritual Friends* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1993).

[15] For a vision of church boards as potential sites for spiritual nurture and growth, see Charles Olson, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (The Alban Institute, 1995).

[16] Palmer Becker, *Called to Care: A Training Manual for Small Group Leaders* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993) offers a means of training leaders for care groups in the church.

[17] I include in my proposal a concern for the proper placement in our structures of expectations regarding financial support of conferences and agencies. In my experience the concept of "per member giving" has generated far more discussion of a *congregation's* relationship with *conference* than it has discussion of an individual's commitment to stewardship of resources. Growth in this particular aspect of one's discipleship seems to happen better elsewhere. Therefore, I suggest that the concept of "per member" giving be replaced. Alternatives might include asking congregations for contributions based on average weekly attendance or on the number of "giving units" within that congregation. A more radical alternative is to ask congregations to discern what their contribution to conference will be *before* conference budgetting takes place, commit themselves to that contribution, and then expect conference planners to work within the amounts committed.

[18] See the sample "Spiritual Life Questions for a Congregation" in chapter 12 of John Ackerman, *Spiritual Awakening: A Guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations* (The Alban Institute, 1994). See also the outline of a five-year "assimilation plan" for new members in Appendix A of Roy Oswald and Speed Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (The Alban Institute, 1987).

Rudy Baergen

Conversion, Spirit Baptism, Water Baptism, and Church Membership

The variations of baptism and membership questions that present themselves for discussion to the Mennonite church are many. One individual has not seen the inside of the church building for over twenty years and yet objects strenuously to any suggestion of removing his church membership. Another member becomes angry when her young adult daughter, who never became a member, is denied membership in the Credit Union because she is not a member or participant of a Mennonite Church. A third person, who was baptized as an infant, lived an active Christian life in a different faith community, then chose to join the Mennonite church through Confession of Faith, and now some years later, asks to be baptized as a believing adult. And yet another wonders if he can be baptized but not become a member of the church. In addition, pastors are regularly asked to be involved in important covenanting rituals, like weddings and baby dedications, for individuals and family members loosely connected to the church. How can we sort out these membership issues in a consistent way and at the same time keep our feet on solid biblical ground?

In the survey undertaken by the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, churches in Canada clearly indicate that we sit on the horns of a dilemma. While we generally claim to have formal policies which spell out what is meant by "membership" (88% indicate *yes*) and while we claim to be intentional about clarifying congregational membership (83% indicate *yes*), less that 50% indicate that they have a policy of follow-up for inactive members, only 33% have a policy of release responding to non-attendance, and only 23% have a procedure to deal with members not in fellowship with the congregation because of a lifestyle issue. Clearly many of us find it difficult to put into practice our theological yearnings. The binding and releasing which Jesus speaks about in Matthew 16:19 is hard, often painful work, and we would sooner avoid it. And when we do take it on, we cannot put aside our pastoral care responsibilities, even for those who choose to be on the edge. But perhaps sometimes we make it more difficult for ourselves than necessary, because we haven't sufficiently recognized the complexity of the body of Christ and its meaning to the individuals who attach themselves to it.

Becoming part of the people of God

As background to our effort to clarify the meaning of church membership, it might be helpful to observe how individuals become part of the new people of God as described in the book of Acts, by Luke. In the account of The Acts of the Apostles, membership into God's people is gained through conversion, Spirit baptism, and water baptism. Peter's inaugural sermon at the beginning of the story already declares that there is a close relationship between repentance (conversion), baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Even before the beginning of the church, the baptism of no lesser one than Jesus sets the stage. All the Gospels record the baptism of Jesus and make it clear that it is the moment in which his identity—who he is, namely the Son of God—is declared by the voice from above. Secondly, the baptism is an empowerment of Jesus by the Holy Spirit to begin his ministry. While for Jesus it is not a baptism of repentance, his baptism, by water and by the Spirit, is the moment in which the proclamation of the Kingdom of God begins. The Kingdom of God is inaugurated when the Spirit descends upon Jesus. With the anointing of Jesus, the messianic age is established (Luke 4:18–19). The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan signifies a new beginning, the new age of salvation, the time of the Messiah, and of the new covenant.

Baptism of the Spirit is also linked with initiation into the new era for the first believers in Acts. Pentecost is for the Christian church what the Jordan River was for Jesus in that it is the beginning of the new covenant for the disciples. It is the beginning of a new age, the age of the church. After the Pentecost event, Peter invites the audience to repent and to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and they are promised that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the story of Acts, baptism of the Spirit and conversion continue to be one and the same. The gift of the Spirit places the individual into a new community, into the new people of God. It is an adoption into a new family, the immigration into a new kingdom, a social, corporate and political phenomenon.[1] Baptism of the Spirit, whenever and however it occurs, signifies the initiation of the individual into the new work of God. So it is with Saul when he regains his sight. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and is baptized. Likewise with Cornelius and his Gentile household. The receiving of the Spirit accompanies the official acceptance of the Gentiles into the new community. The gift of the Holy Spirit is poured out upon them, whereupon Peter asks whether anyone can forbid water baptism, since "they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

Water baptism and Spirit baptism

The relationship between water baptism and Spirit baptism is intriguing. Clearly, for the Acts communities they belong together. And yet Luke regularly describes them as two separate events, with no one sequence of order. Spirit baptism comes from God and is beyond human control. Water baptism is initiated by the human community in response

to what God has done and is the community's way of declaring its unity as the people of God. In two cases (8:14–17; 19:1–6) water baptism—once in the name of Jesus and once in that of John the Baptist—occurs before Spirit baptism. The first incident (8:14–17) of the Samaritans who have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ but not of the Holy Spirit is notoriously difficult to explain. The point certainly is not that they receive a second anointing of the Spirit, since this is the first. Rather, it seems to be that Spirit baptism and water baptism belong together and it is unsatisfactory that the former has not occurred for some reason, perhaps because of the peculiar messianic expectations of the Samaritans. Furthermore, what occurs needs to be understood as part of the scheme of missions in Acts. As is the case throughout the book of Acts, it is the role and responsibility of the apostles to make valid the mission. Thus the mission of Philip is not complete until Peter and John come and baptize the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit.[2] It is nevertheless intriguing that Luke most often separates these two events, because it suggests that it is possible for one to occur without the other. It is possible, in otherwords, to receive water baptism but not have experienced conversion and Spirit baptism, or vice versa, to experience conversion and Spirit baptism but not water baptism. Yet, while they are recognized as separate events, Luke makes it abundantly clear that they belong together.

Finally, it is important to note the peculiar role of the Holy Spirit in Acts. Luke does not give much attention to some characteristics of the Spirit found elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, no mention is made of the fact that the Spirit produces faith, and there are no references to the fruits of the Spirit or to the purifying inner work of the Spirit. The Spirit is understood by Luke and the early church described in Acts with reference to mission. The Spirit is the source of the word and work. The Spirit gives the apostles the power to preach and to do wondrous deeds. The words of the Spirit give direction to the church and mission. The Spirit assures the identity of the church as the people of God. Having said this, it becomes clear why Spirit baptism must be connected to water baptism. Spirit baptism can only become meaningful within the context of a particular people of God who practice the covenant of water baptism. There isn't room in Acts for a Spirit baptism which is maverick and unattached to the mission of a flesh-and-blood church. Likewise, as a passage like 19:1–6 indicates, it is inconceivable that someone be baptized "in" Jesus but not also be "in" his Spirit. In summary, while Luke recognizes a distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism, he shows how the early church sought to hold them together. They belong together and it is the responsibility of the church to see that they stay together.

Meanings for membership

How does this snapshot taken by Luke of the early church assist us in our practical real-to-life struggles with membership issues? As Anabaptist Mennonites we define membership in covenantal terms, and most churches become fairly concrete in what that means,

i.e. the questions in the *Ministers Manual* addressed to incoming members ask for regular attendance in worship, participation in serving, and faithful stewardship. The reality, however, especially for our larger churches, is that some people end up operating with a model of the church more in keeping with the *Volkskirche* concept than a covenantal one. By that I mean that they view the church as an inclusive societal institution expected to respond to highly important needs in the human cycle of life. The point of the church for them is not as much to bring people into a practising covenant as it is to facilitate a successful passing through the important rituals of life. Those of us who define the church in covenantal terms make a basic error if we misunderstand the role of the church in the lives of these individuals. More than one Deacons/Elders Board has had their wrist smartly slapped for trying to casually remove certain "inactive" members! There is a level of commitment here which we ignore at our own peril.

I believe Acts gives us clarification for working more formally with a diversity of categories, categories such as *member, participant*, and *affiliate/adherent*, which more accurately describe the reality of our church communities. The term "inactive member," for those of us who hold to a covenantal vision, is an oxymoron. Membership, by definition, is active and to speak of inactive members is inexact and confusing. *Members* are those who are in living covenant. A covenantal response includes conversion into the people of God and thus Spirit baptism, as well as water baptism performed by the community in celebration of what God has and is doing. All three should be the basis of church *membership*. *Conversion* is a recognition of Christ as Lord and Saviour and is accompanied by Spirit baptism. *Spirit baptism*, as indicated above, places one into the new people of God, it gives identity and it empowers. It signifies the conversion of the individual into the mission of God. *Water baptism* is the community's recognition that such an initiation has occurred. It is a way of grounding the Spirit baptism into human reality, and more specifically, into the mission of the church. Baptism by water is the church acting out its faith that Spirit baptism has and is occurring. (When we look at the Apostle Paul's writings, we see that baptism is closely related to the act of taking on the newness of life. In baptism the believer has died to the old life and been raised with Christ.) Water baptism is connected with tangible covenant-making; with proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

To want water baptism but not to become a member of the flesh-and-blood church is a basic misunderstanding of the nature and intent of water baptism. Such a request does not appreciate the distinction and yet the connection between Spirit and water baptism. A covenantal response must include conversion, Spirit baptism, and water baptism. Although we can not be legalistic in deciding an appropriate minimum age for such a commitment, it is fair to require a level of maturity at which these experiences of Spirit and water baptism can occur, be understood, and be articulated. If someone received water baptism as an infant and has been nurtured within a living covenant by his/her family, it seems appropriate that upon conversion and Spirit baptism, the infant water baptism be

personalized and the covenant be claimed as one's own through a public confession of faith. However, if the infant baptism was not performed in the context of a real covenant, rebaptism as an adult should perhaps be encouraged.

Some individuals in our congregations have experienced conversion and Spirit baptism but not water baptism. Others have experienced conversion and Spirit baptism and also water baptism but in a different setting; they are actively involved in the church but have not formalized their covenant in their present congregation. This corresponds to the role of *participants*. Often there are legitimate reasons why people remain as participants and do not become members. Yet it is our task as the church to invite them into full covenant in order to hold together water and Spirit baptism.

Then there are those individuals who want to be connected to the church but are not in active covenant (as members by definition are) nor are they participants. They may or may not have experienced water baptism. Most likely they experienced conversion and Spirit baptism in the past at which time they were participants or members. Presently they may or may not be in touch with those earlier experiences. What is clear is that their water baptismal vows are not functional and Spirit baptism has lost its primary context. Perhaps there is a need here for evangelism and re-conversion. In their own way, however, these people also belong to the wider church community and correspond to the category of *affiliate*. We should not easily dismiss them or ignore them. In our discussions with them, it is essential that it be acknowledged that they are no longer covenanting members while at the same time it should be recognized that they continue to have a significant attachment to the church. That should not be denied them if they desire to maintain that attachment, albeit at a low level of commitment.

Questions about membership and baptism will continue to confront us in many forms. Understanding the phenomena of conversion, Spirit baptism, and water baptism as we find them described in Acts, and understanding the categories of member, participant, and affiliate may assist us in arriving at a practice which is in keeping with our Anabaptist theology but still allow a place for those attached to the church who choose not to be part of the covenantal circle. In the final analysis, although we need to take our binding and releasing responsibility seriously, we dare not forget that the boundaries we establish for our human institutions can never adequately represent the Kingdom of God.

Notes

[1] William H. Willemon, *Acts: Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 102.

[2] See also 11:1–18; 11:23–26 where this pattern in developed. For further discussion of Acts 8: 14–24 see James Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970), pp. 55–72.

Adolf Ens

Does Membership Depend on Baptism?

Early and Modern Practices

The congregation in which I grew up was served exclusively by elected lay ministers. A number of them were teachers by profession. One, a favourite among the youth, taught history and literature at a Mennonite high school. Especially inspiring for me were his courses on Mennonite history, for which he had written and published a text in four slim volumes. He was also much appreciated as a teacher of the pre-membership catechism classes, to which he was assigned by the congregation every few years.

In due time the congregation elected him to serve as its elder. At that time officiating at baptism, communion and ordination services was still restricted to this office. Now many of us discovered that our respected minister, teacher, and Anabaptist mentor had been baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church of his parents! Furthermore, somewhere along the way in Russia he had been accepted by a Mennonite congregation as a full member without needing to be rebaptized as an adult. We discovered this because before accepting ordination as elder, Paul Schaefer requested believer's baptism. He felt that there was something incongruous about baptizing others as confessing believers when he himself had not gone this route.

Conference positions in the early 1900s

When new immigrant congregations began to join the Conference[1] in the mid-1920s two major issues were raised for the Canadian congregations: the deviation from the traditional Mennonite non-resistance stance through the participation of some in the *Selbstschutz* (self-defence forces) during the period of anarchy, and the fact that a number of congregations in Russia had accepted into full membership without rebaptism people like Paul Schaefer.

The first was formally raised on the floor at the 1925 Conference sessions at Eigenheim, Saskatchewan, when the first two congregations of the 1920s immigrants (Hershel and Dundurn) applied for membership. After a fairly long discussion the Conference accepted them on the basis of their assurance that they fully agreed with the Conference on the issue of non-resistance.[2]

The second "deviation" was less obvious and appears to have come to light more gradually. At the 1926 sessions in Altona, Manitoba, five further immigrant congrega-

tions (from Manitoba and Ontario) applied for membership. Rather than deal with the request directly on the Conference floor as had been done until now, a committee was named to process the applications and bring a recommendation to the delegates. All five were, however, accepted without any recorded dissent.[3]

The following March, H. H. Ewert, minister, principal of the Mennonite Collegiate in Gretna, and editor of the former Conference periodical, *Der Mitarbeiter*, used his considerable influence to raise the issue. In an editorial he warned about some Mennonite churches which had become soft on Anabaptist baptism. An "unbiblical feeling of tolerance" prompted them to accept by transfer persons baptized as infants. "How can a congregation say that it maintains believers baptism if it has members in its midst who continue to cling to infant baptism?" he asked.[4] Although his "for example" was the south German Mennonite church, it is clear that the editorial was aimed at the new immigrant congregations in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada.[5]

Formerly, Ewert continued, each congregation could decide things like this on its own. But now that they had joined together in a conference there must be broader agreement. What if a person who had been baptized as an infant were accepted as full member by one congregation and then later sought to transfer to another congregation of the Conference? If that second congregation opposed such practice it would now either have to offend the candidate and the sending congregation by refusing the transfer, or compromise its own principles.

At the Conference sessions in Herbert in July 1927, two further immigrant congregations (Whitewater and Grunthal) applied for membership. Although the screening committee recommended them, the Conference did not act on the recommendation until it had heard the paper assigned to Bishop Gerhard Buhler of Zoar Church, Waldheim, on the theme "Who may be accepted as member?"[6] Buhler presented a strong biblical basis for believers baptism and expressed the concern that baptismal candidates were sometimes accepted too easily, without clear assurance of their personal faith commitment. In a brief concluding paragraph he added that persons baptized elsewhere as infants, who asked for membership in a Mennonite church, should readily accept this biblical basis and choose to be baptized [again] on confession of faith.[7] This last paragraph generated lengthy discussion which failed to lead to consensus. The matter was tabled until next year.[8]

This issue strained the sense of unity in the Conference with the "Canadian" congregations unable to go along with "some of the immigrants" who took a more lenient stance on accepting those baptized as infants.[9] At Rosthern in 1928 Conference delegates held a special session during the noon break to resume discussion of the contentious issue tabled the year before. At the end of it a resolution was passed declaring that the Conference "is fundamentally opposed to the reception of new members on the basis of infant baptism."[10] The issue was not settled with this resolution, however. At the minister's conference in 1935, Rev. P.A. Rempel, a 1920s immigrant, gave a paper on this topic.

Discussion there showed that "many were prepared to allow exceptions" to the formal Conference position.[11]

The question in the Congregational Membership Survey dealing with this issue (II. 4) is unfortunately so ambiguously worded that it allows us to conclude only that currently 28% "require re-baptism" to receive into membership persons baptized as infants. The others probably deal with the matter in dialogue with the applicant. Where believers baptism is requested it is readily given. Where the applicant has made a meaningful, public, personal confession of faith in the context of confirmation and sees rebaptism as a denial of that earlier reception into the church of Jesus Christ, the person is accepted by transfer. Most congregations using this kind of approach will probably also want assurance that such applicants have accepted our understanding of believers baptism and will not have their children baptized as infants.[12]

Baptism and membership

Two other issues relating to baptism are of importance. How is baptism related to church membership and to participation in communion? Two survey questions on the first (II.1 and II.2) are unfortunately too ambiguous to give us any useful information about how congregations deal with it. However, a sub-point of II.9 indicates that 89% agree or strongly agree that "membership in a local congregation is integral to our understanding of baptism." Nevertheless, congregations from time to time face a request from candidates who want to be baptized but do not want to join a church. In the theology of churches practising infant baptism, where this sacrament is primarily the mediation (or sign) of divine forgiveness, church membership does not naturally follow immediately. In the theology of churches practising believers baptism, however, baptism is not only a sign of God's forgiveness but also a public confession that the applicant has abandoned the old life of sin and begun a new life of following Christ. Anabaptists, at least since the Schleitheim articles of 1527, therefore linked baptism with accountability. That is, Jesus' teaching about giving and receiving admonition and about binding and loosing (Matthew 18) is part of the baptismal commitment. Practically this meant that baptism became the rite by which one entered the church.

Several factors contribute to the current inclination of some to see baptism as separate from church membership. [Responses to the survey item on this (II.9.d.: "Baptism and membership are related but different issues") tell us nothing because it is unclear how many agreed that these were different issues and how many disagreed that they were related.] The strong climate of individualism in our society makes it easy to see baptism as primarily a ritual between the individual and God. The strong congregationalism current in large parts of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada makes some candidates reluctant to join a particular congregation at the time of baptism, yet they wish to be part of the Mennonite (or Christian) church. A few even express reluctance to join "an institution" that has so many "hypocrites" in it. Very few, I suspect, resist becoming a member

in the congregation from which they request baptism because they do not want to follow after Christ or participate in or submit to mutual admonition. In fact, it may be that too little is asked for in this regard. [In most congregations membership is required primarily to vote at congregational meetings and to be elected to office. (Survey I.6.)]

The survey indicates that congregations still affirm a covenant concept of baptism: 78% agree or strongly agree that baptism is "a covenant made by the individual with the church" (II.9.e) and 68% that it is "a covenant made by the church with the individual." (II.9.f) Strong agreement on both stands at only one third. This is not a very firm basis on which to invite new members to participate in mutual admonition as taught by Jesus in what Anabaptists called the "Rule of Christ" (Matthew 18:15–18).

Our reluctance to covenant with each other may be related to a reluctance to monitor, assess, and nurture the faith commitment made by the candidate at baptism or reception by transfer. The survey indicates (II.5) that catechism/membership classes have as primary purpose "preparation to assume the responsibility of membership" (96%) and "disciplining candidates in the tenets of Anabaptist-Mennonite faith" (94%). In addition, 79% see the purpose of these classes as "ascertaining whether candidates are spiritually mature." However, only 16% strongly agree and a further 20% agree that "baptism is a sign of spiritual maturity," while 30% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement (II.9.h). Do congregations really attempt to ascertain spiritual maturity but withhold affirming that it is there? Or, did the membership classes reveal a lack of spiritual maturity but baptism was given nevertheless?

Perhaps respondents found the question too ambiguous, but 39% disagreed or strongly disagreed that "baptism is a sign of congregational approval," while only 41% agreed (II.9.g). If this is an indication that congregations are reluctant to express any kind of assessment of how well its members are living up to their desire and commitment to follow Christ, then we need to work at this issue. A covenant that has meaning for both partners must have a mechanism for mutual accountability. It requires a congregation that has the courage to make binding and loosing discernments.

Baptism and communion

On the issue of who may participate in communion there is also greater diversity of practice than in the past. Again, ambiguity of the question (III.1) on this subject limits the amount of information we have. It is clear that "closed communion" ("members of our congregation only") is extremely rare (2%) and that over half (52%) reported admitting "unbaptized adult believers" to communion. Almost a quarter (23%) also admit "unbaptized youth and children."

Early Anabaptists regarded the breaking of bread as a communion (unity) celebration inseparable from the covenanting together into a community of faith that had happened in baptism.[13] Covenant was made in the baptismal vow, and it was renewed, affirmed and celebrated in participating in the Lord's Supper. In the unecumenical 16th

century members of other churches were more likely to report an Anabaptist communion service to the authorities than to ask permission to participate in it. Our context is such that not infrequently we have visitors from non-Conference of Mennonites in Canada or even from non-Mennonite churches present at communion celebrations. Our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* accordingly does not advocate closed communion.

Throughout virtually all Christendom a prerequisite for participation in the eucharist is some form of public personal commitment to the church and its faith (confirmation). In Mennonite practice this commitment is included in the baptismal service itself, rather than postponed to a separate service of confirmation. Our new *Confession of Faith*, in solidarity with the rest of the church, includes baptism as a prerequisite for communion participation.[14] Since the Conference of Mennonites in Canada has adopted this *Confession*, it seems to me that the 52% reporting that their congregations admitted "unbaptized adult believers" to communion ought now to take some steps to review their practice. This could result in their accepting the rationale of linking covenant making (baptism) with covenant affirming (communion), and hence the practice advocated by the *Confession*. Or it could lead to a different understanding about the meaning and significance of either or both ordinances (e.g. baptism at an earlier age, or communion as a general recognition of the participant as part of the faith community), and hence to a different linking of them. If such conclusions were arrived at after due study and discussion and emerged as strong convictions in a congregation, then it would be appropriate to bring the issue to Conference for consideration by the larger church body. Otherwise the *Confession* will be much less of a vehicle toward and symbol of our unity than I think it ought to be.

Notes

[1] What is now the Conference of Mennonites in Canada was then called *Konferenz der Mennoniten im Mittleren Canada*. In 1932 it became the *Allgemeine Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada*.

[2] J.G. Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre Konferenzbestrebungen: 1902–1952* (Steinbach: Konferenz der Mennoniten in Canada, 1952), I: 174.

[3] Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, I: 182.

[4] H.H. Ewert, "Die Stellung der Mennoniten zur Kindertauge," *Der Mitarbeiter*, 20: 3 (March 1927), 6.

[5] At the 1908 Conference sessions, Rev. Gerhard Epp, Rosthern, had given a paper on the topic: "How should our congregations deal with someone baptized as an infant, who is married to a member of our church, lives among us, is a practicing Christian, desires to join our church, but resists being baptized (again)?" Conference at that time had taken a clear position against accepting such persons without (re-)baptism. Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, 1:54.

[6] Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, I: 196.

[7] Gerhard Buhler, "Wen darf unsere Gemeinde als Glied aufnehmen?" *Der Mitarbeiter*, 20: 8 (August 1927), 2–4.

[8] Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, I: 198.

[9] H.H. Ewert, "Die Konferenz in Herbert," *Der Mitarbeiter*, 20: 7 (July 1927), 1.
[10] Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, II: 209.
[11] Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, II:286.
[12] Bishop Johann G. Rempel, long-time Bible school teacher (Rosthern), author of Sunday School material (4 volumes of *Biblische Geschichten*), and secretary of the CMC (1930–1947) confessed in 1952 that he had acted along the lines of this policy despite the Conference resolution. Rempel, *Funfzig Jahre*, I: 195.
[13] Schleitheim Confession, article 3.
[14] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), Article 12.

April Yamasaki

Every Member an Active Participant, Every Active Participant a Member

Introduction

Some time ago, I met a man who was a committed Christian, who worshipped in the same church every Sunday, who attended one of his church's mid-week study groups, and yet had never become an official member of his congregation. "I'll never become a member," he said to me. "The only reason the church even has a membership list is so that it can collect money. That's what church membership is really all about."

Another acquaintance retains her membership in the church of her childhood. Although she now lives in a different province and no longer attends the church, she is reluctant to change her membership. "I'm attending a different church now, and I have no intention of moving back," she says, "but I really don't want to transfer my church membership. Part of me still calls that home."

For me, these two stories raise the same question: what is the appropriate relationship between participation in church life and church membership? In the first example, there is participation without formal membership. In the second, there is an official church membership without any meaningful participation. In both, it is clear that participation in church life and formal membership in the church are not necessarily the same thing.

Congregational Membership Survey results

1. Church membership without church participation

Responses to the Congregational Membership Questionnaire suggest that the above two stories are not unique in the churches of our Conference of Mennonites in Canada. On the one hand, church membership is possible without church participation—and so our churches find themselves concerned with "inactive" members. While 74% of those responding feel that their way of dealing with inactive members is adequate, 80% would also welcome discussion with a view to developing a consistent policy.

At present, policies and practices vary considerably, including pastoral visits (80%), informal networks (71%), deacon visits (56%), letters (52%), and congregational meetings (27%). Half of those responding try to deal with inactive members within three years; half may take more than four years; and 95% of those responding also say that each case of inactive membership needs to be considered unique.

In all, the survey includes seven questions relating to inactive members, indicating the seriousness of this issue for our churches. While over 90% of those responding say that "active participation in a congregation is essential to the meaning of membership," official church membership does not always mean active participation.

2. Church participation without church membership

On the other hand, active participation in a congregation is possible without formal church membership. For example, only 10% of those responding require club leaders or Sunday school teachers to be members of the congregation; only 15% require ushers to be members; only 23% require youth sponsors to be members; only 40% require members of church committees or boards to be members of the church. Even for elected church offices, church membership is required by only 73% of those responding. At congregational meetings, only 14% limit speaking to church members, while 74% limit the right to vote.

In addition, while there is a high correlation between baptism and church membership (with 90% agreeing with the statement "Baptism in our congregation necessarily includes membership"), participation in communion does not appear to be limited to baptized members. Instead, 52% respond that communion is open to unbaptized adult believers, and 23% respond that communion is open to unbaptized youth and children. While the correlation between baptism and membership is not absolute, it is likely that the unbaptized adult believers, youth, and children referred to here are not members of the church. Yet in many of our churches, this lack of church membership does not prevent them from participating in communion.

In sum, according to the survey, active participation in the work and worship life of a congregation is possible without formal church membership. Since over 90% of those responding say that "active participation in a congregation is essential to the meaning of membership," I wonder if the reverse should also hold true: that church membership is essential to active participation. The survey results do not appear to bear this out on a consistent basis.

Perspectives on church membership and church participation

In light of all this—if, in our church practice, membership does not require participation, and if participation does not depend on church membership—then what is the point of church membership at all? Is it only a matter of money, as one active non-member might insist? Or is it only a matter of sentiment, as one inactive member might feel? Should we

reform our church practice so that formal church membership and church participation are more closely related?

1. A contemporary perspective: church membership versus church participation

For many in the contemporary church, the relationship between church membership and church participation is no longer an issue. Instead, church membership is dismissed as obsolete, and attention is focused on church participation alone.

For example, from their analysis of the contemporary church, the editors of *Leadership* conclude, "Churches used to be measured in terms of membership—how many are on the rolls. Now they're measured by attendance—how many show up this Sunday. Membership has been downgraded to the point of irrelevancy."[1]

Instead of membership in a single local congregation, an individual or a family may become regular attenders at several different churches for several different reasons: one congregation for its Sunday morning worship, another congregation for its Saturday night singles' program; one congregation for regular worship, another congregation for its clubs, yet another congregation for its choir concerts. Any concern for church membership is over-ridden with a concern for attending the church of your choice.

One Presbyterian pastor in California describes this same trend: "Where I live, the fastest growing churches minimize the idea of membership. It is seen as an outdated formalism. What matters, they say, is not that you are a "card-carrying" member of the institution but that you actually participate in fellowship."[2]

This attitude is not confined only to California nor to those only in mainstream churches. Even in my own limited experience, I am well acquainted with those who see church membership as just a formality. "If I feel like a member, then I am a member," they say. "I don't need a piece of paper or some ritual to tell me that. If I ever feel that I don't belong, then I'll simply go somewhere else." In the words of Goetz and Miller, the "virtue of commitment" has given way to the "virtue of choice."[3]

To their credit, however, even the large contemporary churches that tend to minimize formal membership find other ways of attracting and keeping new participants. They may offer several different services at different times and with different styles of worship. They may be intentional about meeting people's needs with a wide range of programs and small groups. They may have a policy that deliberately pairs newcomers with regular attenders of similar family size and interests.

While we may not have—or even want—the numbers or resources to duplicate their programs and practices, we can still learn from the experience of these churches and be challenged by their concern for participation. We may well reject the current trend of focusing on attendance and participation to the exclusion of church membership, but surely we must also reject the other extreme of focusing so narrowly on church membership that we ignore participation.

2. A biblical perspective: church membership *and* church participation

In the New Testament, there is no clear instruction on the relationship between formal church membership and participation in the life of the church. There are no official membership lists. There are no formal certificates of baptism and church membership.

And yet, all those who had been joined to Jesus Christ through faith in him were clearly part of his body, which is the church. They were members of the same body (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:25), who belonged to Christ and to one another (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 5:30).

In the New Testament, the names of those who belong to Christ are written in the book of life (Luke 10:20; Revelations 20:15). In the local churches, there may have been membership rolls—like the list of widows in the church of Ephesus (1 Timothy 5:9, 11). There were letters of recommendation for church workers moving from one local church to another (Acts 18:27; 15:22–23; Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:23). There were issues of serious church discipline that required separation from the church (1 Corinthians 5:2, 11–13).

While church membership in the New Testament may have looked very different from the practices of our own day, then as now, church membership was not simply a formality. It was not just a piece of paper or an empty ritual. Although members were encouraged to give (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8:7; 9:7), membership was not only—or primarily—about money. Although members were to be passionate about their faith even to the point of death (2 Corinthians 11:16–33; Revelation 3:16), church membership was not only—or primarily—a matter of feeling. Instead, church membership was both a spiritual and a practical reality. It meant being part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:25). It meant worshiping and sharing together (Acts 2:42–47). It meant being partners in ministry for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7). It meant meeting together on a regular basis (Hebrews 10:25). It meant honouring one another (Romans 12:10) and forgiving one another (Colossians 3:13). It meant speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and living a life that pleased God (Colossians 1:10). In the New Testament, membership meant participation in the body of Christ, and participation meant being members of one another.

A pastoral response

1. Inactive members and active non-members

Following this teaching, it is clear that both inactive members and active non-members are at odds with the biblical model, which holds together both church membership and church participation. While 47% of those responding have a policy of follow-up for inactive members, and 49% have a tradition that guides this follow-up, the survey did not address church policy and tradition with regard to active non-members.

This may indicate that our churches have a greater number of inactive members on their membership lists than they have active non-members in their pews; however, given the trend away from the commitment of church membership to the consumer mentality of church shopping (especially in urban areas and with higher rates of mobility), this latter group should also receive serious attention.

Active non-members should be encouraged to seek church membership in keeping with their participation in the life of the congregation. As church consultant Lyle E. Schaller has pointed out, "the most widely used technique to keep people from joining is not to invite them."[4] While formal church membership may not change their already active level of participation, it gives them an opportunity to make their commitment clear. As Patterson asks rhetorically, "how seriously can we take a person who says he wants to be part of the church but doesn't want to sign his name publicly?"[5]

Inviting active non-members to join the church may also provide another way of addressing inactive church membership. After all, the person listed as an inactive member on one church roll may very well be an active non-member in another congregation. When such an active non-member joins the church, the inactive membership on the other end also disappears.

2. Membership accountability for ministry

Without some degree of participation, a newcomer to a church is unlikely to stay for long. Seekers who need to hear the gospel also need a place to belong. New Christians need a place to test their faith and to discover their gifts for ministry. More mature believers need to express their gifts and to equip others. Prospective members of all levels of faith need opportunities to get to know the church and for the church to get to know them. And so participation in the life of the church by those who are not yet members is both natural and good.

At the same time, however, the church needs accountability in its work and worship. For this reason, it would seem appropriate to limit certain responsibilities to those who have already committed themselves to the faith and vision of the congregation by their formal membership in the church. For example, if we expect Sunday school teachers, club leaders, and youth sponsors to be committed to their ministry and to model and teach the Christian faith to our young people, then we should also expect them to be members of the church. If we expect the elected officers of the church and the members of church committees and boards to lead the congregation in their respective areas of responsibility, then we should also expect them to be members of the church. Without that commitment to the church as the body of Christ, what are we asking them to model for us, and where are we asking them to lead us?

3. Letters of recommendation

Following the example of the New Testament church, we might be more deliberate about sending letters of introduction when members of our churches move from one area

to another. According to the survey, only 26% of those responding write such letters of introduction to other Mennonite congregations, while 94% say they would appreciate receiving them.

This may seem like a small gesture, but along with greater attention to active non-members and greater membership accountability for ministry, perhaps it may serve to enrich our understanding and practice of church membership. As a church member and as a pastor, my own hope is that every member might become an active participant, and that every active participant might become a member.

Notes

[1] David Goetz with Kevin A. Miller, "Megashifts," *Leadership* (Fall 1995), p. 111.
[2] Ben Patterson, "Why Join a Church?" *Leadership* (Fall 1984), 80.
[3] Goetz with Miller, p. 111.
[4] Lyle E. Schaller, *Assimilating New Members* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 53.
[5] Patterson, p. 80.

Irma Fast Dueck

Invisible Members in a Visible Church:

The Church's Ministry to Inactive Members

Introduction

A while ago, as I was paging through our church phone directory, I was struck by how many people once very involved in our church no longer attended church, even though they continued to reside in Winnipeg. Some of these were members who at one time sat on our church council, were deacons, taught Sunday school, chaired committees, and were youth sponsors. Some of the members had only joined the church a few years ago, yet within a short while their enthusiasm for the church dissipated to the point that their church attendance diminished altogether. Most of the names of these "invisible members" remain in our church phone directory—they serve as reminders of the breadth of our church. I continue to ask myself how can church members move, in just a few years, from active involvement in a congregation to total inactivity?

This phenomenon is not unique to Mennonites. A number of years ago, Donald Posterski and Irwin Barker studied the church in Canada and published their findings in their book, *Where's a Good Church*? They found that religious affiliation was "extremely stable" in Canada with 90 percent of Canadians identifying themselves with a religious group. However church attendance was only 23%. They claimed that identification with the church had become separated from participation.[1] The gap between church attendees and those who remain on the membership list grows continuously in many denominations.

In the history of the church, the separation between participation and identification was unthinkable. To belong meant to attend. For Mennonites, to be baptized is to become a member of the church. Marlin Jeschke states, "baptism implies membership in the *redeemed community*."[2] It is perhaps the individualism of our society that sees decisions and commitments as "private" acts. While they are personal, they are not private. I believe we cannot be Christian alone. Separation from the world leads to participation (*koinonia*) in a new community, the church. We need the church in order to deepen our faith and help us to live in obedience to Christ into whose body we were baptized.

> We are called to recognize that a purely private relationship to Christ cannot exist, nor a bestowal of the Spirit given to be enjoyed on our own, as it were, in

> isolation from the Christian fellowship. *Koinonia* is a key term of the Christian life, connoting fellowship in the Holy Spirit with Christ and with his saints, and it takes its rise in baptism to Christ and the Body.[3]

Yet perhaps even more significant than our need for the spiritual nurture and discipline which the church provides, is our belief that the church is not a human creation. It exists because God has called a people together and is trying to shape them into a community, which reflects the love of God. Just as Christ is God incarnate, so the church, the body of Christ, incarnates God. We come to know and meet God through our life together, as we incarnate the very character of Jesus.

For many inactive members the church is no longer considered vital to the Christian faith, a belief difficult to reconcile with our Mennonite theology. As congregations, how do we respond to inactive members? The Congregational Membership Survey done by the Resources Commission (CMC), reflects some of the difficulty in working with inactive members. Most churches do not have a clear policy for releasing inactive members who continue to reside in the vicinity of the church. According to the survey almost all would agree that each case needs to be considered uniquely. Those who have worked with inactive members know that it can be arduous task, where signs of positive change are often minuscule.

It is clear that we cannot think about inactive members without reflecting on our own understanding of the church. Who is the church and what is the meaning of membership? What is the circumference of the church? Most congregations will feel the tension of at least two perspectives. On the one hand, we desire to be an all-inclusive church, where we are hesitant to place judgements upon the behaviour of particular members, choosing rather to offer grace and acceptance, with the hope that our love will "win" them back to the church. On the other hand, we are concerned that we are a church that has integrity and takes baptismal and membership vows seriously—a church that strives to make our life in Christ visible. What does our Mennonite understanding of the church say to us as we ponder our ministry to inactive members?

The visible church

Historically, according to some, the *idea* of "church" represents the very centre of Anabaptist theology and thinking.[4] This has been the primary point of separation between Anabaptism and Protestantism. The Anabaptists identified the church as the gathered congregation of believers who have voluntarily entered it by baptism upon confession of faith.[5] Only those can be members who are obedient to Christ. Dirk Philips, an early Anabaptist reformer, emphasized particularly the visibility of the church. It is visible because its members live public lives of obedience to Christ.[6] From its beginning the Anabaptist Church was always a visible church—"the living brotherhood-congregation which [the Anabaptists] regarded, at least in part, as the nucleus of God's kingdom on earth or its attempted realization."[7]

Conversely, a distinctive of Luther's ecclesiology is his image of the church as the *hidden church*: "the church is a so deeply hidden thing that no one can see or know it but can only grasp and believe it in baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Word."[8] Only faith can recognize the church's existence. The world cannot see the church of Christ. Here, Luther's Christology emerges. Just as God meets us "hidden in the sufferings" of Christ, so the church is also "veiled in the flesh" and hidden.[9] The church is also invisible because it is the community of believers and no one can see faith. Christ, the good shepherd, is the only one who knows his sheep.

The issues arising between Luther and the Anabaptists primarily had to do with the question of the circumference of the church. How do we identify the visible church? Where does it begin and end? What are the marks? While the concept of an "invisible church" grew out of Luther's theology, the Anabaptists insisted that there could be no hidden church. Theirs was always a visible church, in whose community God's kingdom on earth could be realized. Baptism became a distinguishing feature between the circumference of Luther's church and the Anabaptist view of church. With baptism came the idea of voluntarism for the Anabaptists—members entered the church through a conscious adult decision involving a confession of faith and a commitment to walk in the way of Christ.

As contemporary Mennonites we continue to believe that the church is to be a visible church. Our newly published Confession of Faith claims that "the church as the body of Christ is the visible manifestation of Jesus Christ" and that "the church is called to live and minister as Christ lived and ministered in the world."[10] If we hold this to be true, then we must assume that the church is different from the world and that a church needs boundaries that distinguish itself from the world.

Why are boundaries so important? Why not just be as inclusive as possible of everyone? Without boundaries we can no longer be a visible church. In a recent article in *The Mennonite*, Lois Barrett claims that a healthy church needs to have boundaries in order to better engage in its mission. She writes,

> Boundaries are needed for healthy identity. If the church doesn't know who it is, if it doesn't know who belongs here—or doesn't agree on who should belong—the invitations, the reaching out to others will be half-hearted and not convincing. When we know who we are, what we are here for, we are then able to attract and integrate (assimilate) people into a community.[11]

It is because we are called to be the visible church that incarnates Jesus Christ, that is, a church with clear boundaries that distinguish us from the world around us, that we cannot remain passive about those who choose to be "invisible" in our midst. What do we do when we are concerned about the spiritual life and decisions of these church members? The concept of the "invisible church" would discourage us from action towards them. Being a "visible church" means that we have a responsibility to those members. At times our accountability to one another calls us to practice discipline, not in order to be

punitive or produce a perfect church, but rather out of concern for people's spiritual lives and for the purpose of reconciliation and restoration, in keeping with the forgiveness and grace of God. Marlin Jeschke, in his book *Discipling in the Church*, emphasizes this understanding of discipline when he writes,

> ...discipline begins with concern for people whose spiritual condition stands in uncertainty. Discipline does not expect to finish its task by producing an absolutely "pure church." Such a static church with a finally fixed and unchanging boundary would not be a living church. A living and healthy church is one that is faithful in the ongoing mission of making disciples, thereby expanding the boundaries of the church.[12]

The church's work with inactive members must be such that it works towards bringing reconciliation of relationships within the church community and with God. While there may be any number of possible reasons for a church member's inactivity, broken relationships, either within the family or within the church, seem to be the most common. In order to bring restoration, healing needs to be brought to this brokenness.

The invisible church member

Behind every inactive member there is a story to be heard. A number of years ago our area conference sponsored a workshop with Dr. John S. Savage. He focused primarily on inactive members,[13] on bored and apathetic church members. He had recently completed a research project studying the experiences of bored and apathetic church members. His research findings were startling. His research team found that 95 percent of all the inactive church members interviewed, had experienced what he calls an "anxiety provoking event" (APE), which impacted their church experience. Subsequent research found that these events usually came in clusters, several APEs compounding within six months to a year.

The types of anxiety experienced by the inactive church members varied. Savage names at least four different kinds of anxiety that inactive church members may have experienced. Some experienced what Savage calls a *reality-anxiety*, based on a very specific event or experience. A young theology student preaches her first sermon in her home congregation. After church a well meaning church member tells the young student that it was a good sermon, although it is unfortunate that she is a woman. That's a reality-anxiety-provoking event for the student. A family has a child who commits suicide. A sympathetic deacon reminds the parents that their grief must be even more intense since they know that their child is not in heaven. Very few church members, other than the pastor, visit the family in the ensuing months. These are reality-anxiety-provoking events for the family.

Another less obvious kind of anxiety experienced by inactive members is *moral anxiety*. Moral anxiety arises when people experience, in themselves or in others, behaviours that they believe aren't right. A pastor admits to having an affair with one of the parishioners in the church. There's a good chance that a number of church members will

not continue in the church following that confession. A woman who as a child had been sexually abused by her father suppresses the memory and when she comes to remember her abuse as an adult, she suddenly feels she can no longer attend church. No one knows why she is no longer there. Her moral anxiety-provoking event is private.

Neurotic anxiety is pain caused by the imagination. Someone may claim, "I don't go to church anymore because I know the pastor and the deacons don't like me." The experience may reflect some truth, but chances are it is neurotic—it is in the person's head. A new couple begins attending the church. They receive visits from the pastor and the deacons and numerous invitations to various church events. Then they join the church and the attention they received drops significantly. They wonder what happened. The well-meaning pastor and church members have accidentally encouraged unrealistic expectations, which have given rise to neurotic anxiety.

The last kind of anxiety sometimes experienced by inactive church members is what Savage calls *existential anxiety.* It is the kinds of anxiety that arises when one feels that life may be meaningless or when one is brought face to face with one's own mortality. "The church has just lost its meaning for me," "The worship and sermons do not speak to my life and what I am experiencing," are familiar claims made from those experiencing existential anxiety. A person who has experienced numerous crises wonders whether God even exists anymore and whether church attendance and involvement isn't futile.[14]

As mentioned, inactive church members often experience a number of these anxieties in clusters within a short period of time. If unresolved, these may lead them to eventually leave the church. Often anxiety, of whatever variety, arises from some sort of conflict or problem. Savage and his researchers found that the most common conflict was within the family. Marriage problems and trouble with adolescent children often cause members to become inactive. They may feel that the church will judge them (neurotic anxiety) or that they are not good enough to go to church (moral anxiety).

Sometimes the conflict is within the church, with the pastor or other church members, and the main reason for not attending church is avoidance rather than to bring resolution to the problem. A church member may feel overworked and not appreciated, which also may drive a member from the church. Sometimes all these conflict areas merge together. A family that is having problems at home often seems to avoid the pastor and feels disappointed about the way other church members have treated them and thinks they are overworked and unrewarded. They are probably simultaneously experiencing reality, moral, neurotic, or existential anxiety.

Savage claims that if the hurt or anxiety is not dealt with at the time eventually these church members leave the church. After a while they psychologically seal off the pain and anxiety and reinvest themselves into other institutions.[15] I became very aware of this phenomenon of sealing off the pain when I was pastoring and visited members who had been inactive for some time. After probing into their past history with the church,

frequently past painful experiences would be talked about as if they had happened recently. It was as if the experiences were placed into a sealed jar and on a shelf. When I visited, the jar was opened and inside the experience was as fresh as if it had just occurred. If this kind of pain and brokenness is indeed experienced by 95% of invisible church members, where do they fit in our *visible church* theology?

Invisible members in a visible church?

It is difficult to reconcile invisible members with our theology of a visible church. Our visible church theology reminds us that we cannot ignore those members of our church who have chosen to become inactive, or be passive about their inactivity. To do so would blur the boundaries of the church and soon make the church invisible. Neither does our visible church theology allow us to easily remove them from our membership lists. We must take seriously the confession of faith made at baptism, recognizing that baptism signifies that act of accountable entrance upon the way of faith. When a church member falls away from this, we must work towards bringing restoration.

How do we minister to inactive people? We need to find ways of keeping our current members active in the church and teach ourselves how to intervene in the stages leading up to inactivity. We need to teach ourselves to hear the pain of inactive people—a pain that is often hard to recognize since these people are not present. We cannot get inactive members back to our congregations by avoiding their pain. We must take initiative and hear and bear their pain and thus pave the road for them to return. Unfortunately, frequently part of bearing the pain of inactive members is to listen to their anger. Sometimes the anger will make us feel guilty, other times it makes us feel mad. It is important to recognize, however, that anger is not the opposite of love. Apathy is. Anger, in fact, often grows out of love. For example, it is my love for the church that causes me to be angry when women are not allowed into particular positions in the church. Since calling on an inactive member is often painful, it is easy to enter a cycle: People leave because they're angry; I'm angry because they left; I punish them by letting them sit in their pain; they punish me by not coming back.

This is why reconciliation is crucial. Active members of the church go to an inactive member on behalf of the church in an act of reconciliation. If we are willing to bear some pain with the inactive person, reconciliation has a greater chance of occurring. If we take our visible church theology seriously, that indeed we, the body of Christ, incarnate God who calls us, we must reflect the love of God in bringing reconciliation to those who have become invisible. It is after all, the very nature of God, who through self-giving love, suffers with us and invites us to be reconciled with him. May the grace and love of God grant us courage to truly be the church to one another, bearing with one another, discipling one another and forgiving each other, that we might truly become God's faithful people.

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body."

– Colossians 4:12–15b (NRSV)

Notes

[1] Donald Posterski and Irwin Barker, *Where's a Good Church?* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1993).

[2] Marlin Jeschke, *Believer's Baptism for Children of the Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), p. 47.

[3] G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 282, as found in Jeschke, *Believer's Baptism*, p. 47.

[4] Robert Friedman, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1973), p. 116.

[5] Leonhard, Schiemer, "A Letter to the Church at Rattenberg," (1527–1528), as found in Walter Klassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1981), pp. 104–5.

[6] Dirk Philips, "The Church of God" (1562), *Enchiridion* (Ontario: Pathway Publishing Corporation, 1966), pp. 369–70.

[7] Robert Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

[8] *Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, (Weimer, 1883–), as found in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 291.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Article 9, "The Church of Jesus Christ" as found in *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), p.40.

[11] Lois Barrett, "Healthy Boundaries: What Defines Mennonite Identity Today?", *The Mennonite* (April 22, 1997), p.11.

[12] Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), p.165.

[13] John Savage is president of L.E.A.D. Consultants, Inc., in Reynoldsburg OH. Dr. Savage's research on the apathetic and bored church member was part of his doctoral studies. He is a pastor in the United Methodist Church, a trained psychotherapist, and a certified Minister of Music and Education.

[14] The four types of anxiety are expanded in Savage's book, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member: Psychological and Theological Implications* (New York: L.E.A.D. Consultants Inc., 1976).

[15] Savage's doctoral research can be found in his book, *The Apathetic and Bored Church Member*. The CMC Resource Centre has both video and audio tapes of Savage's workshops.

Bill Block

The Pure Church Ideal and Real Membership

Introduction

The church by definition is a "called out" community. This is the meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which stands behind the English word 'church' in the New Testament. There is a kind of "over-againstness" from the very start. The question is, over against what? The church is called out from "the world," and thus in a sense stands over against the world. The next question is how this is expressed or manifested.

The answers have varied. Our tradition has said that it is not manifested primarily in a new politics, though there is a sense in which that is true. Rather, a common answer has been that it is manifested in the *pure church ideal:* the world is impure, but the church is called to purity.

It is my view that we have adopted that pure-church ideal, or perhaps more accurately have carried it on from our forebears. This has had a direct bearing on our understanding and practice of membership.

In this paper I want to examine where this ideal has come from, current understandings and practices, and the problems that come with this emphasis. Finally, I want to suggest a possible paradigm shift.

The pure church ideal

The origins of this ideal are rooted in the Bible and in our history.

It is from the New Testament epistles, in particular Ephesians, and the book of Revelation that we have taken our cues for the "pure church." Many of the epistles are addressed to "the saints" in this or that locality. The word 'saints' has had its impact. The metaphor of the church as the Bride of Christ has epitomized this ideal of purity and holiness. The letter to the Ephesians is replete with phrases such as "God's holy people" (5:3); "as is proper among *saints,*" "holy," "radiant," "without stain or wrinkle or blemish" (5:25f); and "put on true righteousness and holiness" (4:24).

In the 16th century the Anabaptist movement was a reaction, at least in part, to the perceived lack of concern for purity in the Roman church. The emphasis on believers' baptism underlined this: one chose to commit oneself to the church and a life of disciple-

ship, separated from (*over against*) the world.

Menno Simons' writings point to the ideal of the pure church. In his description of the true church he lists a host of characterizations and then by contrast the opposites as found in the traditional church. He concludes: "Yes, dearly beloved brethren, the pure, chaste, and spotless bride of our Lord Jesus Christ is quite different from this carnal, unclean, adulterous, and shameful affair"[1] (referring here to the traditional church).

Menno disdains the Roman Church for its laxity. In the article "Reply to Gellius Faber," Menno goes to great lengths to defend the ban in striving for a pure church. "Yes, my reader, wherever this excommunication, ban, or expulsion is zealously and earnestly taught and practiced in the fear of God, without respect of persons, there doubtlessly the church of the Lord will be maintained inviolate, in salutary, pure doctrine, and in a life without offense. But where this is neglected, there we find nothing but vanity and world, which may be plainly seen in all the churches and sects which are not of us."[2] Menno certainly has influenced the development of the pure church ideal in the Mennonite church, though in recent history most have moved a long way from his views on the ban.

Living with the ideal

How do we live with an "impossible" ideal?

It has been observed that if you aim for nothing you are bound to hit it. So we have maintained that dropping the ideal of the pure church was the worse option. Hence various efforts to realize it have always been with us. The following paragraphs give some indication of how we have attempted to live up to this ideal.

Most notably, this is seen in our practice of baptism, communion, and discipline.

Baptism was open to those who had freely chosen the way of Christ. Thus, it became the defining moment and the symbol for the pure life. Significant attention was paid to the age of the baptismal candidates, preparation for baptism through months of catechism classes, and testing of the sincerity of commitment and intentions. In some sense an attempt was made to "keep out the impure."

In our tradition, participation in communion was reserved for those who had made a public commitment through baptism. Beyond the first communion, the observance of the Lord's Supper was commonly preceded by a time of preparation, where self-examination was stressed and "making it right" with fellow church members was expected. In other words, the Lord's Supper was for the "pure."

The impetus behind discipline, if and when applied, was for the good of the erring member, but it grew out of concern for the purity of the body, the church. In general we have felt that the shunning practiced in earlier times was too drastic, but an informal shunning can develop whereby we freeze out people who do the unacceptable or intolerable.

The findings from the Congregational Membership Questionnaire sent out by the Resource Commission of Conference of Mennonites in Canada (see Appendix I) indicate that membership is important in holding certain offices or performing certain services

within the congregation. In 73% of congregations you cannot hold an elected office if you are not a member. While this does not evidence a direct concern with purity, it does indicate sensitivity as to who is qualified to fulfill certain functions.

Some of the efforts at maintaining a pure church have resulted in what appears to some as tokenism. By that I mean that we have been selective in dealing with impurities. The most common sins we have tried to deal with are those around sexual immorality. That story does not need to be documented, for everyone can cite cases that in hindsight are ludicrous if not sad.

We do not get as excited, for example, about gossip, financial immorality, abuse of power, greed, indifference, or racial prejudice. We have not done well in finding creative ways of maintaining purity in these areas.

One other area where we have made an attempt is in financial stewardship. Congregations and Conferences have worried about this. Membership dues, every member visits, and pledges have been used to promote accountability. The *Giving Project*[3] is the most recent attempt to encourage better stewardship.

A further attempt at trying to live with the ideal is what might be called the "house church" movement. In smaller groups, often with an annual covenant renewal service, the meaning of membership was emphasized. Along with this came accountability and the search for a purer church.

A final illustration of living with the ideal could be stated in a goal: "*at least preach it.*" Our chances of nearing the ideal are better if we keep it before our eyes.

In this connection it is interesting to notice in the Resources Commission survey that a high percentage of congregations clearly spell out the meaning of membership in policy statements, but when it comes to practice in clarifying that policy they score rather low.

The impossible ideal

The reality is that our church is not pure. Everybody outside our church already knows this. I pose the question: has this ideal served us well?

There is a subtle seductiveness that comes with holding a high ideal. In our culture high ideals are praised: 'aim for the top' is the advice given to high school and college graduates. Aiming high *feels* better than it should, or better than is warranted. I can lull myself into a kind of blissful peace by telling myself that I want/intend to do better.

We feel good about our new confession of faith (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*) and have congratulated ourselves on its comprehensiveness, clarity, and quality. It seems to me there is a subtle temptation to think that having a high ideal somehow makes us better. "We wrote it, own it; so it must mean we are something like it." Have we recognized this temptation?

Problems

There are a number of problems in putting forward this ideal.

Firstly, there is the danger of pride or smugness. We glow with news reports of how Mennonites have served in times of disaster, at home or overseas. And we experience consternation and horror when stories come about leaders who have crossed sexual boundaries. There seems to be a disturbing sense that we are a cut above others.

At the inter-church/denominational level, this pure church ideal has led to some other foibles and games around the concept of membership. The game could be called: "Ours is better!" or "Comparative Religion," where the object is to compare one congregation/denomination with another. In this game statements such as "at least we don't do, or tolerate, that," are common. It is a game we have played; but it is a game at which more lose than win.

If we trot this out as a reason for being in our church—the idea that this, in spite of some shortcomings, is the church closest to the New Testament ideal—then when people find what appears to be a more "ideal" church, they will feel free to leave. They may indeed see it as a move of purity to join that other church. This may deteriorate at times to mean the church where 'the action' is.

This competitiveness among churches can distract all of us from who the real enemy is. In this game there are winners and losers, as in sports. And the metaphor does not stop there. It even leads to a "fire the coach" mentality by those who think they are losing.

A second problem with the pure church ideal as practiced in our past (and present) is that it may encourage pretense. In the homogenous communities where everyone knew fairly accurately what you did, the watchful and evaluating eye of the neighbour was always there. "If purity is the local ideal then I want my neighbours to see me as holding to that ideal." This might be so especially if one is not particularly into purity. But this can lead to an ethos of suspicion and finger pointing. The urge to hide our weaknesses becomes strong if revealing them brings no dividends. Indeed, the social stigma and cost of admitting our wrongdoing may seem so high that cover-up appears by far the preferable course. This in turn makes healing and reconciliation very difficult.

A third problem is the "in" and "out" dichotomy. In the "pure" church there seems to be this need for definition, or lines of demarcation. Being "in" needed definition, and the desire was there that this should have some visible, if not perfectly measurable, signs. We can all name the signs of piety that were the indicators in our communities.

This opens the door for finger pointing and the development of a fairly shallow standard as to who was in and who was out. In a congregation this way of dealing with piety or purity has not been kind to the understanding of membership.

Another result may be that thinking people lose respect for a church that defines 'in' and 'out' in this way. The feeling people may lose respect also.

A fourth problem centers on the difficulty of maintaining purity. When in unusual

cases discipline is attempted it may cause so much conflict, polarization, and listing of other sins among us that did not get addressed, that congregations seldom try it again for a good many years.

The Resources Commission survey reveals that fewer than half our congregations have a policy for follow-up for inactive members. Even fewer have a policy or tradition for releasing people from membership. Only 8% of congregations consider this very important, and another 20% think it fairly important.

Pastors cringe when well-meaning but new deacons push for cleaning up the books when the annual plea from the Conferences comes suggesting so much per member for their budgets. This is arduous and politically sensitive work that brings few results. Yet, if it is further argued that "No, this is not just about money, but about accountability as members," it will get the wheels turning more easily than most anything. Still, the effort is made, to some extent, in the interest of purity.

One brother told me a story recently of how years ago they spoke of their church as having XXX members, and they did so with some pride. In the course of time the "Conference" began a kind of per-member levy for the larger conference budget. Then upon closer checking the church discovered that their membership was actually only XX, and not XXX. But a clean membership list does not a pure church make.

A further problem is that the sensitive persons among us become too introspective. The oversensitive take all preaching very personally and feel guilty rather too easily. We can get preoccupied with our own purity; or with "how am I doing?" One of the negative spinoffs of that is that it often produces neurotic guilt.[4] The apostle Paul discusses a similar issue in 2 Corinthians 7:9–11.

This "false" guilt can lead to depression. A Mennonite psychiatrist once told me that depression was one of the more common forms of emotional illness among Mennonites. Too much introspection and self-punishment does not lead to joyful discipleship.

I recall the consternation a member felt during a Bible study when we came to I John 3:9. "No one who is born of God will continue to sin... he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."

The tendency to define the meaning of membership negatively, that is, by things we do not do, can be another problem with this pure church ideal.

Another problem is the pressure toward conformity that seems to come with the pure church ideal. In such a setting community can be seen as having a stifling influence. It has been observed that we are not welcoming to the artistic persons among us, and indeed lose many of them. Is this one of the reasons for this? Does this perhaps also explain the findings of the poll taken a few years ago by Angus Reid and Macleans magazine which showed the existence of many self-admitted believers who do not associate with any church?

Is it possible that we get so preoccupied with keeping sin out that we lose interest in bringing "sinners" in? Or is the "spiritual atmosphere" such in the pure church that "sin-

ners" soon sense that this is not a safe place, and leave?

One of my friends thinks that we are overly careful about whom we baptize. In an effort to make sure they understand all about it, we have pushed the age upwards too far. This hinges on a concern for purity as well. In short the emphasis on purity does affect our "gatekeeping."

A final problem or issue is the impact this ideal has on pastors. Pastors in our churches carry a lot of the burden of this high ideal. The pastor frequently is the 'keeper of the gate.' So pastors agonize over whether a particular person is really ready for baptism. Again, this is not to say that this kind of agony is all negative. Fortunately others in the congregation stand ready to help with the readiness-for-baptism issue.

The other reality for pastors is that the standards of purity held by the congregation are expected "at least from the pastor." Others may not be held accountable, but pastors will be.

Real membership

We would do well to attempt to address these problems. Let me indicate some possible directions that might serve us better.

What can we substitute for the pure church that is without spot or wrinkle? That is difficult to answer. The fact that there are problems does not mean that the ideal should be jettisoned. I want to propose a different way as a paradigm shift.

To do that I want to use the word 'ethos,' a very useful concept. Webster defines it as follows: "the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, guiding beliefs of a person, group or institution."

We could say that our church has an 'ethos of purity.' That is the "distinguishing character... of our group or institution."

Marcus Borg's book *Jesus: A New Vision* characterizes the ethos of the Jewish community in Jesus's day as an ethos of holiness (a close parallel to *purity*). Over against this, Jesus lived and proclaimed an ethos of compassion.

The community in Jesus's day was very concerned with concepts of holiness and with setting boundaries between Jews and Gentiles or Jews and Samaritans and between clean and unclean, righteous and sinners. Jesus challenged that in various ways. For example, healing on the Sabbath broke the holiness code but fit well into the ethos of compassion. The story of the man robbed on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho is another example where holiness and compassion collide. One common interpretation of why the Priest and Levite did not stop to help the victim was that it would have made them ritually unclean. This would disqualify them from Temple duties until they had gone through a rather arduous cleansing ritual. The concern for holiness won out over compassion. The Samaritan acted out of compassion; Jesus praised that. The parable also challenges the "you are out" attitude that existed toward Samaritans. The pure are not all on the "inside".

It can be argued that the Mennonite church also has an ethos of compassion. The evidence for that would be efforts such as Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonte Voluntary Service. These, however, do not focus on membership in the church. Perhaps a requirement of members should be a two-year term of service with one of these organizations or some related mission effort.

The ethos of compassion could be drawn from the Sermon on the Mount, the same source where Jesus cites the shortcomings of public acts of piety. An ethos of compassion would build on such things as the importance of forgiveness (Matthew 6:12–15); the washed face (6:16f) which relates to joy that comes with inner integrity rather than outward show; laying up treasure in heaven (6:19f) which addresses lifestyle issues; the good eye which fills the body with light (6:22f) in order to see the good in others and not the speck of sawdust (7:3); the one master to serve (6:24f) which overcomes the duplicity which brings the need for hiding; culminating in some sense in the non-anxiousness of faith (6:28f); focused all together on seeking the kingdom as first priority (6:33).

The catechetical instruction would need to be shaped by this ethos of compassion as well as by an ethic of compassion. The test for baptismal candidates would not centre around the signs of piety/purity of the community, but rather on whether they know the compassionate God Jesus portrayed.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* says "The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God, while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance."[5] The baptismal candidate's lack of perfection would not be the main issue; rather it would be whether he or she is ready for this voluntary commitment to follow Christ and to be accountable to the church.

Discipline

We would still need to face the reality of sin and find a new face for discipline.

What do we do about sin (sinners) in our congregations? Is there forgiveness or simply a looking the other way? Are we lax or longsuffering? Is it that "binding and loosing" scares us, or is it that we believe that something so lofty belongs to God alone?

We need to develop a fuller doctrine and practice of confession (repentance), and forgiveness. To do this we will need to develop the kind of gentleness Paul speaks of in Galatians 6:1. "If someone among you is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." We will also need to develop the compassion he writes about in Ephesians 4:32. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

A compassionate church, a forgiving church, must not only preach confession, it must also seek to provide a setting or a way in which that can happen.

We must develop an ethos where confession is freeing and forgiveness is palpable. At the same time we have learned from dealing with cases of abuse that tough love is

sometimes required.

For this to happen we must rediscover the importance and meaning of submission and accountability; or "discerning the body." We must see these as spiritual disciplines and not as legal necessities. If that could be so it would produce a level playing field; that is, a church where all confess.

We discern the body when we find a brother or sister who is spiritual (Galatians 6:1) and submit to their admonition. We discern the body when we find a soul-friend in the congregation to whom we confess our sins. The soul friend would help us work out whether the confession needs to go beyond that setting to the pastor or to the board of deacons.

This accountability has to recognize that individualism has limits. Freedom is not the ability to do as one pleases, but to do that which is most liberating for the entire church. Thus there is a kind of limiting of freedom for self in the interests of a larger good. This has to do with deep spiritual aspects such as humility and counting others better than ourselves.

Discerning the body, according to Paul (1 Corinthians 11:27f) is a part of preparation for communion. The ethos of compassion sees self as one standing alongside of other members of Christ's body, all committed to confession, all in need of mutual forgiveness, equally in need of the grace of our Lord.

Discerning the body could also mean recognizing that we are members of a much larger body than 'Tenth Street Mennonite.' It has to do with loyalty and excitement about the kingdom movement, the compassion movement, the Jesus movement.

Notes

[1] Menno Simons, *Complete Writings*, p. 300.
[2] *Ibid,* pp. 723–24.
[3] The *Giving Project* is an initiative of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church designed to develop a theological statement about money and how we use it, and to educate congregations in a biblical approach to stewardship.
[4] For a discussion on guilt, see Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace.*
[5] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995), p. 39.

Muriel Bechtel

Powerful Practices: Building the Body and Nurturing Individual Faith

While church membership is certainly not the only distinctive feature of Mennonite tradition, the 1995 *Confession of Faith* affirms the importance of being part of the "body of Christ [which] is the visible manifestation of Jesus Christ."[1] When membership practices in Mennonite congregations become reduced to keeping current records of membership changes in the congregation, it seems as if we are in danger of becoming like a leopard who has lost her spots.

It is for that reason that the survey initiated by the Resources Commission and the invitation to reflect further on the results is timely. It gives congregations the opportunity to share their frustrations and successes in dealing with some of the complex sensitivities and practical realities that surround the issue of church membership. These issues are intensified by many of the changes in our society—increased mobility, less loyalty to institutions[2], and a suspicion of outside experts resulting in shifting the locus of authority to inner judgements about truth and its implications for individuals and for community life.[3]

The survey indicates that for the majority of congregations keeping up-to-date lists is a way of strengthening the meaning of church membership (71%) and of affirming their belief that active participation in a congregation is essential to the meaning of membership (76%). However, congregations are less consistent in supplementing the practice of keeping careful records with other activities such as teaching or preaching what they believe about church membership. Eighty-six per cent of the congregations reported that they do not regularly celebrate membership renewal. While the survey was not designed to document how the understanding of membership has evolved in Mennonite churches, it seems that there are changes occurring in congregational practices, such as baptism and communion, which imply that significant shifts are taking place.

Shifts in practice

Some of those shifts became evident to me while I was planning a service for Worldwide Communion Sunday with Anita, who had been a member for twenty years or more in the

urban congregation to which I had just been called as pastor. We discovered many similarities in our views as we wove both innovative and traditional elements into the format and content of the communion service. It was when I asked who was invited to participate in communion in this congregation that we encountered some of our differences about the practice of communion and its relationship to church membership.

In my past experience it had been baptized Christians who were invited to take communion, but this congregation had made the decision several years earlier that unbaptized children were welcome to participate with their parents. I assumed that only people from the Christian tradition would receive communion, whereas Anita saw the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a gathering that included anyone who was "spiritually hungry or thirsty." As I thought about the differences between her understanding of communion and mine, I remembered the time some years earlier when several people were upset because a Buddhist woman who had been sponsored by the congregation as a refugee went forward with the others around her and received bread and wine with the others. It was some years before she was baptized and became a church member.

Such differences in understanding are not unique to any one congregation, but they reflect some of the change from a time when most Mennonite churches would have restricted communion to baptized members. These changes are evident throughout the survey and attest to some of the growing diversity and the irregularities among Mennonite churches in the way they define membership and relate it to other practices in the congregation.

According to the survey, in most Mennonite churches baptism continues to be closely linked to membership. Ninety-eight per cent of the churches in the survey required baptism for their members, and 90% believe they should actively encourage persons in the congregation to be baptized. Preparation for baptism in the form of catechism or membership classes is also given a great deal of importance by most congregations. The majority of congregations (90%) expect that "baptism necessarily includes church membership." A slightly smaller number (84%) stated that baptism "does not necessarily require membership in a local congregation." The majority of churches continue to assume that with baptism the person will become part of a local gathering of believers.

Individual, community, and God

In the survey respondents were asked whether baptism is a covenant made by the individual with the church or by the church with the individual. No mention was made of baptism being a sign of a relationship with God. While there may be other reasons for this omission, this wording seems significant. It points to a confusion that is further illustrated by the lack of consensus among respondents on the question of whether "baptism and church membership are related but different issues." Have we equated the individual's relationship with the church so closely to baptism that we sometimes fail to distinguish

between the individual's horizontal relationships and their relationship with God?

In the *Confession of Faith*, baptism and the relationship to the church are closely connected, but there is a distinction made between the two. Baptism is described as both incorporation "into Christ's body on earth, the church" and a "sign of cleansing from sin." It is a "pledge before the church of [the individual's] covenant with God." The commentary states further that the practice of baptism was intended as a "sign" of the individual's "pledge to God to follow Jesus Christ within the context of Christ's body, the church."[4] This affirms that baptism is a "sign"[5] of the individual's commitment to God, and membership signifies a commitment to the congregation. The two are related but different.

Equating the individual's commitment to God with their relationship to the community is an important one for Mennonites who find it so difficult to integrate into our congregations those who do not share our background or to worship and work along with those in our congregations and conferences with whom we have deep differences and conflicts. Sometimes it seems that we build our congregations on feelings of connection and common understandings of what community is rather than the fact that we have a common bond because we have committed ourselves to God as known in Jesus Christ.

Norman Kraus has been a strong proponent of the need to maintain a strong connection between baptism and the individual's commitment to the church. He points out that "modern insights from anthropology, sociology, and psychology confirm the biblical presupposition that the basic unit is not the independent individual before God but the individual-in-community before God. We become self-conscious individuals only in community relationships." Kraus further emphasizes that, for believers in the early church, baptism was a "public declaration of their commitment to the new community.[6]

In a recent article, Julia Kasdorf approaches the question of blurred distinctions between the individual and their community from another more embodied perspective:

Sitting on the bench among grandmas and aunts and great aunts and cousins both distant and close, you also knew that to belong to the Body had more than metaphoric meanings. You not only shared history, religious beliefs and practices with these people; you also shared genetic material: you were one body in flesh. You belonged with the people in your congregation because you were literally related to them; you experienced the body of Christ as an extension of your own physiology. So while other Christians may have understood metaphorically 1 Corinthians 12:27, Mennonites in traditional ethnic communities could claim their community as a body in actuality. To be enmeshed like this can be pleasurable, comfortable and secure, although it sometimes breeds freaks of flesh and soul.[7]

As Kasdorf points out, there is a shadow side to having such a close connection between the individual and the community: "To pull away from the community is to lose a part of one's self"[8] and, I would add, a part of one's relationship to God. When a person has been hurt or betrayed by others in the church and is not able for a time to commit him

or herself to a local congregation, we have difficulty acknowledging that they may still have a vital relationship with God. When a young adult or person in crisis is troubled by questions about the nature and existence of God, we have a hard time affirming them in their desire to struggle honestly and openly within the context of the community of faith.

To further complicate matters, some of our practices add to the perception that the boundary is the most important feature of the body of Christ.[9] When the Lord's Supper is an occasion for congregations to distinguish clearly between those who have made a public declaration of commitment to Jesus Christ and the church and those who have not, there are only two choices—either you are committed to Christ and the church or you are not. Either you are inside or outside. Either you are one of us or one of them.

In his book, *Trackless Wastes & Stars to Steer By*, Michael King offers another alternative for the way we view church membership. He describes three models: the bounded, the unbounded, and the centered. In the bounded model, the congregation's goals, purposes and expectations are usually spelled out clearly, and to enter the circle one needs to accept them. The danger in such a model is that those inside the circle may arrogantly equate their judgement with God's, thus suggesting that anyone outside the congregation is not one of God's people. In the unbounded congregation it is enough simply to want to affiliate with these particular people. Such a congregation offers a place to belong, but is lacking in moral, spiritual, and biblical content and direction. It defines a direction—a journey that takes one toward God as known in Jesus. It expects some compatibility between the congregation and the potential member's commitments, but not a rigid adherence. Together the various members of the congregation decide what is important, as long as they agree that they are still moving toward the same centre.[10]

In such congregations the boundaries are visible, but they are permeable. Like a living cell, there is movement back and forth across the membrane. This model takes into account the complexity of the human response to God and also of human relationships within community. It recognizes that maintaining health and growth requires movement and interaction across the boundaries.

Communion practices

From the survey it appears that some congregations are changing their communion practices so that their boundaries are becoming less rigid. Half of the congregations (52%) stated that their communion was open to unbaptized adult believers and 25% extended it to unbaptized youth and children. Increasingly it seems these congregations view the communion service as an occasion for expressing their desire to be welcoming and inclusive. They place less emphasis on drawing lines between those who are inside and those who are outside. As this shift happens, less attention is given in the communion service to the meaning of membership and the implications of living out one's commitment to God within the community of believers. Some congregations, such as Waterloo North Mennonite Church and Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship, have annual member-

ship renewal celebrations where members are invited to recommit themselves to their congregational covenant.

In a significant number of congregations regular communion services continue to be important occasions for reflecting on and renewing one's covenant with God and with Christ's body, the church. To address the concern for inclusion, some of those churches in which only baptized persons are invited to receive communion have created a separate ritual which includes unbaptized persons. For instance, at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, children, youth and others are invited to come forward and receive a grape and a blessing from the pastor. Toronto United Mennonite Church, which has a traditional Good Friday communion service for adults only, has begun to have an annual Maunday Thursday program for children.

In addition to believer's baptism, some congregations have created new traditions to mark special events in a person's life and express the community's desire and commitment to accompany the individual in their journey of faith. At Warden Woods Mennonite Church, at the age of twelve, each child is presented with a Bible in a public worship service. A mentor presents the Bible and chooses a verse of scripture which is offered to the child as a special word of counsel and guidance.

There are many evidences in our society and churches today of a deep hunger and thirst for God and of the spiritual self's need for expression. Congregations who hear and respond to that yearning will invite people to grow in their love for God while also learning to love themselves and their neighbour. The church needs to be about encouraging all people on their journey, whether they are close or far away from this centre. Keeping membership records current will not achieve that end. The church needs "powerful practices"[11] which provide occasions for people to affirm where they are in relation to that centre. Other practices are needed to reaffirm the covenant among members and encourage commitment to the local "body of Christ," reminding participants that the congregation is our context, but God is at the centre.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995), p. 40.

[2] Robert N. Bellah et al. "Individualism and the crisis of civic membership," *Christian Century* (May 8, 1996), pp. 510–515. While they observe that churches are less affected by these trends than other voluntary institutions, many congregations are experiencing similar changes.

[3] Ruth E. Krall cites futurist Willis Harmon in her essay, "Anger and an Anabaptist Feminist Hermeneutic" in *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring, 1996), p. 151.

[4] *Confession*, pp. 46–47.

[5] *Confession*, p. 47. The ceremonies of baptism and the Lord's Supper are called signs in the confession.

[6] C. Norman Kraus, *The Community of the Spirit: How the Church Is in the World* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993), pp. 28, 30.

[7] Julia Kasdorf, "Bakhtin, Boundaries and Bodies," *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* vol. LXXI, no. 2 (April 1997), pp. 170–171.
[8] Kasdorf, p. 172.
[9] Kasdorf, p. 173.
[10] Michael A. King, *Trackless Wastes & Stars to Steer By* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1990), 124–126.
[11] The term "powerful practices" is borrowed from James Wm. McClendon, Jr., who develops it in his book, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 166ff. It's use here is quite different than in McClendon's writing.

Gerald Gerbrandt

Church Membership, Circumcision, and Children

Background

Some years ago I taught a course at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College on baptism and communion. Although I had long been interested in the subject it was not my primary area of expertise or training so I had to do considerable reading in preparation for the course. In the process I was naturally confronted by the controversy concerning the right time for baptism. Should infants be baptized as a sign of God's grace? Or should baptism wait until the individual can make a responsible decision (a position usually labeled adult or believers baptism)? In the sixteenth century Anabaptists were willing to die for their convictions on this issue. Today the position a person or community takes on the matter is no longer life threatening, but the debate continues, with the main-line churches largely practicing infant baptism, and free or believers churches practicing believers baptism.

Reading about the debate was fascinating. The New Testament played a foundational role for both sides of the issue. Those holding to believers baptism would emphasize that in the New Testament baptism always follows an individual having responded to an invitation to repent or to believe (whether the baptism of John the Baptist or the later baptisms in the church), and they would note that there is no clear example in the New Testament of an infant or child being baptized. They would also argue that believers baptism is consistent with the New Testament understanding of church as a visible body of the committed. Those holding to infant baptism would counter these arguments (for example, they would suggest there very probably were children within the household of the Philippian jailer baptized in Acts 16), and present their own arguments. And so the debate continued.

At one point, however, the two sides diverged sharply. For those defending infant baptism the Old Testament also played a significant role. The church was understood as a replacement of, or continuation of Old Testament Israel. For the church, baptism then replaces the ritual of circumcision practiced by Judaism. In his book *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* Paul K. Jewett makes this case.[1] God initiated a covenant with Abraham and his descendents (note especially Genesis 17), a covenant based entirely on God's unmerited love (cf. Deuteronomy 7:7–8). Circumcision is not a condition of the covenant, or some kind of legal requirement, but a sign and seal of that covenant, just like

the rainbow is a sign of the covenant of grace God made with all humanity in Genesis 9. Circumcision symbolizes the person's identity with the people of God, and in later Israel was required of those entering the people of God from the outside. In the New Testament Jesus Christ renews and expands the covenant, sealing it with his blood. This "covenant of grace" requires no conditions of the sinner, only the recognition that Christ has died on our behalf. Jewett concludes, "the sacrament of circumcision, which was the sign and seal of the covenant originally administered, is essentially like the sacrament of baptism, the sign and seal of the covenant as newly administered in Christ."[2] He admits the two do not agree in every particular, but nevertheless, sees sufficient contact between the two that it is appropriate to argue for infant baptism using circumcision as an analogy.

I was intrigued by this element of the debate, first because of the near absence of any serious consideration of this argument by those advocating believers baptism, and because of my own interest and training in Old Testament studies. I wondered whether the Anabaptist/ Mennonite writers were ignoring this argument because of our historic tendency to give the Old Testament limited place in theologizing. I was reminded of this debate, and the weakness of the Anabaptist participation in it, when I was asked to reflect on the question of church membership from the perspective of my specialization, namely the Old Testament. As I reflected on it I became convinced that North American Mennonites living at the end of the second millenium can indeed learn from the Old Testament practice of circumcision even without fully accepting Jewett's argument and his position on infant baptism.

Circumcision in the Old Testament and in Israel

Circumcision was well known in the ancient near east, the world of Israel and the Old Testament.[3] Egypt and many of Israel's neighbours practiced it. The practice was so common and the rite so ancient that it is impossible to say anything about its origin. It is very possible that originally the rite was associated with puberty or as part of preparation for marriage.

The Old Testament first mentions circumcision in Genesis 17 as part of the larger story of the call of Abraham. Here it is introduced as a sign of the covenant God is making with Abraham and his descendents. The clear statement is made that for all future generations every male is to be circumcised at the age of eight days. Any male who is not circumcised is considered cut off from his people and has broken the covenant.[4] This then is the overarching Old Testament position. Circumcision is the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. All Israelites throughout history were to practice this ritual as a way of identifying with the covenant people.

Even a quick glance at the history of Israel reveals that the story is not as simple as suggested by the programmatic passage of Genesis 17. Two stories set shortly after the time of Abraham make it clear that circumcision did not happen systematically or universally even among the descendents of Abraham and Sarah. Exodus 4:24–26 is a puzzling,

enigmatic report about Moses and his family returning to Egypt, and should not be over-interpreted. Yet it does indicate that even Moses had not had his sons circumcised. Joshua 5 describes Israel at the point of entry into the promised land. Before they are allowed to enter, Joshua is commanded to have the Israelites circumcised, because *all the people born on the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised* (Joshua 5:5). Again, the text makes it clear that circumcision had not been practiced even during the time Moses was their leader.

Given the antiquity of the ritual of circumcision it is not surprising that early Israel also adopted it. During this time most of the people Israel had contact with also practiced it (with the exception of the Philistines), so it could not have played a primary role in identifying an Israelite, or distinguishing one from a foreigner. In fact, it is doubtful that a concern to maintain a sharply distinct identity was very prominent during the time of the Israelite state. King David married a non-Israelite with no apparent negative consequences. King Ahab is indicted for his marriage to the foreign Queen Jezebel, but this probably reflects a later judgement. It is striking that Ahab was able to marry as he did and still remain king of Israel. During the time of kingship and state, identity appears to have been determined primarily by citizenship—Israelites were those who lived within the boundaries of Israel (and Judah), those who were citizens of the nation state.

All that changed with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BCE, and the beginning of the Babylonian exile. There was no king to lead them; there was no temple with its official priests; there were no physical boundaries to define them. They were a small minority in a foreign land surrounded by an alien culture and people. Many political states previously had been conquered like this, and had disappeared from history. After all, this is what happened to the Northern Kingdom when it was defeated by the Assyrians, and many of its citizens were taken into exile. If the people of Judah were to survive as a distinct people they would need to develop a clear identity. In Babylon the exiles became a "people of the book," a people which received its identity through obedience to the law. At the same time two older customs increased tremendously in significance and became symbols of their distinct identity—strict observance of the sabbath and the ritual of circumcision. Unlike most of Israel's earlier neighbours, the Babylonians did not practice circumcision, so it sharply distinguished the exiles from the dominant culture of the land. Over time circumcision became the identifying mark of a Jew.

The significance of circumcision for Judaism continued as the combination of Greek culture and Roman political power came to dominate the world of the Jews. The Greeks also did not practice the rite, and some of the Roman leaders were hostile to it, forbidding it in their domain. This larger reality contributed to increasing its significance as a distinguishing characteristic of Judaism. By New Testament times circumcision had become the "act of initiation into the covenant community." Normally it took place eight days after birth, but if an adult male converted to Judaism it would be required at that point. Although it did not in and of itself purify a person, it "represented the removal of impu-

rity."[5] Paul could thus speak of Abraham as having "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Romans 4:11). Paul may have argued against circumcision as required for Gentile converts, but he recognized its central significance for the Judaism of his day.

Church membership: Anabaptist tradition and contemporary Mennonite practice

The Anabaptist understanding of church, with membership consisting of those who had voluntarily chosen to be baptized, was a radical innovation in the sixteenth century. Ever since the fourth century the prevailing pattern had assumed a unity of church and society. A child became part of society through birth and, with few exceptions, a child became part of the church through infant baptism. Since all were baptized, all were members of the one church. Struggles for power between the religious and political authorities might take place, but the basic unity of church and state was assumed.

The major Protestant groups of the reformation were church renewal movements. They were highly critical of abuses within the larger church, but they continued to accept the concept of a state church. They continued to consider all inhabitants of a region or country members of the official church. Anabaptism was also a renewal movement, but after some early negative experiences Anabaptists became pessimistic about reform in the official state church and placed their hope in the formation of visible, committed bodies of the faithful. Walter Klaassen describes the Anabaptist position as follows: "The church was now identified as the gathered congregation of believers who have voluntarily entered it by baptism upon confession of faith. Only those can be members who are obedient to Christ. Love is the chief mark of the church."[6] Peter Riedeman, an early Anabaptist, speaks of the church as "a lantern in a dark place, a beacon to light the way to those in the darkness of his world."[7] And Dirk Philips emphasizes the visibility of the church "because its members live public lives of obedience to Christ."[8]

It is doubtful that any theological emphasis in early Anabaptism played as significant a role in distinguishing it from the other reformation groups. The church is distinct from society so that it can be a light to society. Only those who have voluntarily committed themselves to Christ and the fellowship of believers are part of the church. Baptism is the ordinance in which a public confession of faith in Christ is made, and through which a person becomes part of the covenant community. Sixteenth century Anabaptists are usually considered to be the first of what is frequently called the "believers church tradition," those groups which emphasize that the church consists of those who have made a responsible decision and commitment to be part of the body of Christ, and thus practice believers baptism.

At a number of points this traditional emphasis continues to be reflected in the Congregational Membership survey conducted by the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. Virtually all congregations have membership

expectations (98%), and the majority distinguish between members and non-members in the church registry (65%). Inactive membership is considered a sufficient problem that policies are developed to respond to them, with 76% maintaining that "the motive for reviewing membership lists is because active participation in a congregation is essential to the meaning of membership." Anabaptist roots with an emphasis on the significance of church members are still very evident.

And yet the survey also hints at some uncertainty or ambiguity within our congregations on the significance of church membership. A significant majority of our congregations require membership of those holding an elected office, or of those voting at congregational meeting. But in most cases membership is not required even of those playing fairly influential roles in the congregation (Sunday School teachers—90%; youth sponsor—77%; club leaders—90%). This ambiguity is seen most clearly when communion practice is considered. Nearly half of our congregations open their communion to unbaptized adults, and approximately one quarter consider it appropriate for unbaptized youth and children to participate in communion. Here is a significant departure from traditional Anabaptist practice and thought.

This last ambiguity requires some attention. Consider the tension, or perhaps even contradiction, it reflects. On the one hand Anabaptism has emphasized the visible church, the church as a body of responsible adults who have publicly confessed their faith and committed themselves to Christ and the fellowship of believers. Baptism is the ceremony in which confession takes place, in which a believer commits herself or himself to the body, and in which the body commits itself to support the believer. As I noted above, most survey responses continue to reflect this emphasis on membership. On the other hand, communion, that liturgical practice in which the saving death of Christ on the cross is commemorated, and in which believers reconfirm their covenant with God and fellow church members (i.e. they reconfirm their baptismal vow), is in many congregations separated from the question of baptism or membership.

Some years ago my home congregation, Bethel Mennonite in Winnipeg, debated whether to welcome unbaptized children to participate in communion. The board of deacons led the congregation in a lengthy examination of the meaning of baptism, membership, and communion. After much discussion the congregation agreed to accept the traditional Anabaptist understanding of baptism and communion—communion assumes a former formal commitment to Christ and the church and thus is limited to those who have been baptized. This represented an internally consistent understanding of both ordinances, but clearly it is not the only possible way of remaining consistent. An alternative possibility would be to develop a new understanding of baptism and/or communion. This can be done carefully and consciously, or it can evolve gradually over time. I suspect that in settings where unbaptized children and youth are welcome to participate in communion this latter will happen. Likely the understanding of communion will change first. Gradually it will come to be understood primarily in terms of God's sacrificial action and

the individual response to it, with decreased emphasis on the relationship of the individual to the visible community. Eventually the significance and responsibility of formal membership and the concept of the covenanted, visible church will be seriously undermined. Once these elements of the church's faith have been redefined a consistency between practice and theology will have returned, but it will be a consistency which represents a serious loss of an important Anabaptist and Biblical principle.

Given these alternatives, the stance my home congregation took appears the strongest. The traditional Anabaptist understanding of baptism and communion are affirmed, with consistency requiring that communion is for the baptized. But although it may be the strongest, it remains inadequate, or at least insufficient. It may be the right response, but it doesn't deal with the problem underlying the issue. As the survey makes clear, Bethel isn't the only congregation struggling with the question of whether unbaptized children and youth should be welcome to participate in communion. Here is evidence of a serious issue facing our Mennonite church today, a problem which is not solved simply by maintaining the traditional positions.

Back to our Anabaptist experience. During the 16th century, Anabaptists challenged the union of church and state that had developed over the centuries. Their conviction was that each individual had to make a personal decision for the Christian faith and that the church consisted not of everyone within a geographical area, but was a visible (i.e. distinct, separate) body of those who had made a conscious, public commitment to Christ and to the body of Christ, the church. This was consistent with an emphasis on the significance of church membership, with believers baptism as the ceremony of induction into membership.

One of the ironies of Mennonite history is that despite its original emphasis on a believers church, persecution, migration, and historical and social circumstances resulted in some of the descendents of these same Anabaptists developing communities in which church and community were essentially one. The closed communities of the Russian Mennonite colonies represented a new type of church–state synthesis. The Mennonite settlements in the reserves of southern Manitoba were set apart from larger society and became communities unto themselves. There were sharp lines between ethnic or social Mennonites and "the English" or the non-Mennonites. The communities of the Swiss and south German Mennonites in North America (this includes, among others, those who formed the Mennonite Church and the Amish) may not have had formal reserves, but they had their own ways of drawing lines (e.g. distinct dress, culture, etc.) between themselves and larger society. In each of these settings Mennonite children had a clear sense of who they were. A child growing up in a Mennonite colony in Russia knew she was Mennonite and not Russian. Her identity as part of the Mennonite people was clear even before she was baptized and a member of the church. The same could be said for a Mennonite child growing up on a reserve in southern Manitoba, on a farm north of Waterloo, or in most other Mennonite settings. The distinct nature of the Mennonite commu-

nity provided the basic identity, allowing formal emphasis to be placed on the voluntary decision of the young adult to confess the faith and to become inducted into the covenanted body of believers.

For those Mennonites who are part of General Conference and Mennonite Church this has largely changed.[9] We have rapidly integrated into North American society and culture. We have become full participants in business, politics, higher education, and most other spheres of society. We are pleased that the formal affirmation of pluralism in Canada and the United States gives us a place in this society. Interest in evangelism makes us hesitant to emphasize the ethnic elements of our tradition. Our congregations have become "voluntary societies." The time when our Mennonite communities were so close that a distinct Mennonite identity was formed in children long before they were confronted with the question of baptism is largely behind us.

My contention is that it is this changed reality which lies behind the contemporary Mennonite inconsistency regarding the place of unbaptized children at communion. On the one hand, our theology of the church and baptism leads us to understand communion as a liturgical practice for those who have been baptized. On the other hand, our strong sense of family and community leads us to see our children as part of the fellowship, and yet we are aware that these children are not developing the identity with the church and the Christian faith we desire them to have, and so we grasp at communion as a way of including them, of sharing with them that God loves them. After all, we know that most of our children are not without any faith—in most cases the Christian faith does not come instantaneously just prior to baptism—and we do not want to withhold from them the sign of God's grace, the bread and the wine.

Suggestions and Conclusions

If the previous analysis is correct, then instead of inviting unbaptized children to communion, thereby undermining our theology of church and baptism, we need to focus our attention on where the problem or challenge is: How do we develop in our children a strong sense that they are part of a church community, a community based on the teaching and work of Jesus Christ, a community which is accountable to each other and distinct from larger society, a sense which helps prepare these children later to make a mature commitment to Christ and to the church, a commitment which is represented by baptism and confirmed by communion?

It is the Old Testament rite of circumcision which has led me to phrasing the question in this way. During the time when Israel was a political state, circumcision does not appear to have played a major role. Once in Babylonian exile, however, it became an important identifying symbol. Circumcision did not purify or redeem, but it was a sign that the child was part of a particular minority within a foreign culture, a group which offered total allegiance to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Circumcision played a very major role in signifying that unique identity until the point where the child became an adult and

had to decide for himself whether to remain part of the Jewish community, or whether to attempt to fade into Babylonian society as we know so many Jews did.

The Mennonite (excluding Amish and Hutterite) experience in North America today is much like that of the exiles in Babylon. We may not have been forced into our "exile," but we have become a small minority intermingled in a foreign society, in danger of losing our existence. Separating ourselves from society in closed reserves or through distinct dress is no longer an option, as well as not desirable. Our existence depends on developing a way of forming Mennonite identity in our children.

Let me quickly make it clear that I am not suggesting Mennonites begin to practice ritual circumcision. Circumcision distinguishes between male and female in a way which is quite inappropriate. It could not sufficiently distinguish between the church community and the rest of society. And it has no roots or connection with our faith and community. But the challenge is whether we can develop a mechanism, a ceremony or symbol which has the potential to play a role comparable to what circumcision did for the exiles in Babylon.

One observance many Mennonite congregations have adopted in the past number of years which might have the potential to make such a contribution is child dedication. If this were to be the direction we should go, at least two changes in understanding and practice would be required. First, the language and understanding of the ritual itself should be reviewed. I have the impression that the language we use at such events is very carefully chosen to avoid any connection with child baptism or the idea that actual forgiveness (or purification) takes place through the ceremony. As a result we begin by speaking about dedicating the child, but the larger emphasis is on committing the parents and congregation to nurture the child into the faith. This is not wrong, but I would argue for greater emphasis on the child itself. Christ loves this child, and has died for it—child dedication might be understood as a ceremony in which this is the primary focus. Parents and congregation commit themselves to communicating this truth to the child in the years ahead in a manner which will lead the child to own that truth.

Secondly, more ritual or ceremonies need to be added to the child dedication so that it can play a greater role in providing identity for the child as the child matures. Perhaps a special gift to the child could be given as part of the ceremony, a gift that represents the church and could become significant to the child as the child matures. But symbolism should not be limited to the event itself. Perhaps there could be an annual event in the life of the congregation where these dedications are reaffirmed (a childrens' "communion"?). The challenge will be to develop a whole series of events, a set of symbols, a way of relating to these children which will communicate to them that they are part of the church, that the church includes them and recognizes them, and that the church is preparing them for the time they will be fully accountable members of the congregation. And in this structure it will be important that it is the whole church that participates and relates to the child, not merely the parents of young children (the group frequently left with the

responsibility of teaching the children in Sunday School).

One of the potential problems the above creates is the distinction it makes between children of the church and those who might have some connection with the church even though their families are not involved. There is, however, no reason why such children could not be dedicated as children rather than as infants if they would so desire. This would not be believers baptism, but it would be a way of inviting the child to begin identifying with a congregation, a local manifestation of the people of God.

I have talked about adapting child dedication to be the structure which is used to help develop identity in children, but perhaps a new ceremony should be developed instead. My central concern is that we recognize the need within our Mennonite church to determine a way of developing identity with the church in our children, now that we no longer are part of communities made distinct through geography or custom, and that we develop symbolic ways of fostering such identity. Circumcision played this role for the exiles in Babylon—what might we substitute?

Notes

[1] Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978). Inside the front cover the book is given a descriptive subtitle: *an appraisal of the argument that as infants were once circumcised, so they now should be baptized.*

[2] Jewett, p. 85.

[3] Any good Bible dictionary will give a brief introduction of circumcision in Israel and the Old Testament. Two excellent examples are J. P. Hyatt, "Circumcision," *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, I:629–31; and Robert G. Hall, "Circumcision," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), I:1025–31.

[4] "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not your offspring. . . . Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Genesis 17:10–12,14).

[5] J. P. Hyatt, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* I:630.

[6] Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1981), p. 101.

[7] Klaassen, p. 101.

[8] Klaassen, p. 102.

[9] It should be noted that these dynamics have changed far less for groups like the Amish and Hutterites. In these communities children continue to receive their primary identity as members of the Amish and Hutterite community long before they are asked to make the decision whether to be baptised and become part of the church. And yet, the Amish are the fastest growing of all Mennonite groups. Note the article by Steven Nolt in *Festival Quarterly* (Summer, 1992) comparing the rapid growth of the Amish and other conservative Mennonite groups compared to the more progressive Mennonite groups. Between 1974 and 1989 Old Order Amish grew by approximately 100% whereas during that same time The Mennonite Church grew by 9% and the General Conference **decreased** by 3%.

Tom Yoder Neufeld

The Lord's Supper: Party or Solemn Ritual?

Introduction

Eating and drinking together has great significance. We eat together in order to celebrate important events, milestones, or persons, often as part of rituals and traditions. Sometimes we eat together in order to express hospitality, but sometimes also to express a special sense of belonging. Nothing is more important for strengthening bonds between people than eating together. Celebration, hospitality, and restricted access are, however, values in potential conflict, not least as they relate to how Mennonite churches today celebrate communion. Whereas today many or most Mennonite congregations continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a special meal for members of the church only, half of the congregations in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada no longer make baptism a requirement for participating in communion (see the survey done for the CMC by the Resources Commission, in Appendix I). Many—about a quarter of CMC congregations—also admit (unbaptized) children to communion (see survey). Not surprisingly, this has generated much sometimes stormy debate. In the following reflections I wish to explore briefly some biblical images that might help us in our discernment.

Three New Testament images

I find three relevant images in the New Testament. First, there is the image of Jesus eating and drinking with his followers, supplying food for the thousands eager to hear what he has to say and inviting to his table those otherwise never invited: outcasts, sinners, tax-collectors, and prostitutes. In the second image we see the followers of Jesus in the weeks and months following Easter eating together to express their solidarity with each other, and no doubt to imitate their Lord's generosity to them. Third, we find the familiar image of a troubled church gathering for a solemn memorial ritual meal, remembering and proclaiming the death of their Lord.

1. Jesus eats with anyone, especially with outsiders

In the first image we see Jesus eating and drinking with the folks following him about. The predominant impression is one of embrace and inclusion: eating and drinking with the marginalized as the central expression of the invading kingdom of God. Jesus is described in the Gospels as consistently leaving himself open to the accusation of having

too good a time eating and drinking—and with the wrong people at that. This evidently troubled the austere John, his first supporter, enough to have his disciples ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to await another?" (Matthew 11:2). Jesus responds by identifying his eating and drinking with outcasts with the way of Wisdom (Matthew 11:19). Significantly, in Proverbs 9:1–9 Wisdom sends out her messengers to invite all the "simple" to her party of bread and wine.

Matthew clearly wants us to understand that to follow Jesus is to participate in Wisdom's hospitality: to open our home, our table, to those otherwise shut out of the circle of care and acceptance. Such hospitality is nothing less than participation in God's own generosity. So Jesus's table fellowship is essentially an evangelistic enterprise (Mark 2:15–17). When the Pharisees ask, "Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus says to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

To the extent that the Church's eating recalls Jesus's "partying," it will always be an expression of the generosity of the embracing and healing Christ and an anticipation of the full Reign of God.

2. The church makes sure everyone eats

The second image is of a community of solidarity, or as Mennonites like to call it, "mutual aid." Acts 2:42–47 depicts believers devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to breaking bread, and to prayer. They hold all things in common, including their meals. All this is both an expression of solidarity with those in need and a powerful means of witness to the surrounding community. Eating together is for the early church an act of concrete social justice. God is joyfully thanked as giver of all things, but this thanks recognizes that whatever God has given is for the good of all. For such a church, eating and drinking together becomes an occasion of thankful celebration, but also always a test of loyalty to the community, most particularly to those in need.

To the extent that the church's eating and drinking today recalls the common meals of the earliest churches, its common meals will express and test its commitment to practical everyday justice.

3. The church eats and drinks as an act of remembering and recommitment

Things were not always as rosy as this rather idealistic snapshot of the early church in Acts 2 suggests. Failure to practice this solidarity likely accounts for the special emphasis expressed in the last of our images—a solemn eating and drinking together in memory of Christ's death for us (1 Corinthians 11:17–34).

As to historical context, it appears that the church in Corinth was highly divided along class and perhaps also ethnic lines. In allowing this to affect their communal eating patterns the Corinthians were only following social convention. As a consequence, for example, slaves, with no control over their own lives, would show up late, and because no one had waited for them, they were left with nothing to eat. People would eat with

those with whom they felt most comfortable. Some members were being callously allowed to fall by the wayside. Through such behaviour, members, indeed the congregation as a whole, were falling prey to God's judgment.

Paul's response reflects the gravity of the situation. First, the Corinthians do not "discern the body." In their lack of care for each other, in allowing social class to divide them in their eating habits, they show that they do not comprehend that they are members of the one body of Christ, crumbs equally of the same loaf, to use the image Paul uses in the previous chapter, and thereby linked inextricably to each other, for better or worse. Paul wants them to understand that eating and drinking together is the physical enactment of their *communion* with each other as much as it is union with the Christ who gave his life for them. To eat and drink together with proper discernment for "the body" not only strengthens the bonds among members of that body, but is also a re-membering with their crucified Lord. The one dimension is inseparable from the other. To eat and drink without "discerning the body" renders the body sick and the death of Jesus trivialized. Such is not the Lord's supper (11:20).

Eating and drinking together is a memorial meal in honour of and in obedience to Jesus, but it is also always a proclamation, a sermon on the crucified Christ. And given that communion is celebrated by *members* of the body of that Christ, it is also always a moment of recommitment to participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. As such, much like the Passover rite in Israel was a yearly covenant renewal, so eating the bread and drinking the cup becomes a repeated event of recovenanting—to each other and to being Christ in the world. Not to "discern" the body in this way renders the body broken, but for judgment, not salvation.

To the extent that we eat and drink together in keeping with Paul's instructions to the Corinthians we will be summoned again and again to probing the full significance of our shared membership in the body of the crucified Christ, both in terms of our relationship to each other and to our Lord. As such it will be the solemn occasion of recommitment to our baptismal vows.

The church's past practice

As rich and deep as are the roots of the church's eating and drinking together, as illustrated in these three images, it remains somewhat of a mystery as to exactly how and how often early believers ate together. They evidently had love feasts from the very first, common meals that reinforced their sense of belonging to each other and offered opportunity to show hospitality to outsiders—in short, feasts that evoked the memory of Jesus's own generous eating and drinking. It seems, however, that Christian communities very soon found the need for a ritual meal which would allow them to commemorate Christ's death and its implications for them. At some early stage the love feast and the memorial meal appear to have become distinct events, where the memorial meal was not a matter of

satisfying hunger or thirst (1 Corinthian 11:34), but a ritual of remembering: "remembering" in the sense of recalling Jesus's last meal with his disciples, and thus the death of Christ and its significance, but also "re-membering" in the sense of reconnecting as members of Christ's body. We don't know how often they met for such purposes, however, or whether there was any consistent practice among early congregations.

Communion/Eucharist/Lord's Supper has since the very early decades taken on chiefly the character of a memorial ritual—not least also for Anabaptists and Mennonites. Making a responsible decision to take on the often hard work of discipleship and the sometimes tough job of church membership has been central to our understanding of church. Participation in communion has therefore quite naturally been preceded by baptism. The Lord's Supper has then been a test of loyalty to those baptismal vows. Generally it has been so recognized also in traditions which have a less restrictive understanding of church membership. Even in churches which baptize infants communion has until recent decades been reserved for those old enough to "own" their infant baptism (catechism and confirmation). In other words, the Church's tradition has been to treat the Lord's Supper with great seriousness and solemnity. One dimension of this has been to restrict participation to those who are baptized members of the church. In Mennonite tradition the solemnity has traditionally included a stress on self-examination, on restoring relationships within the congregation which have been strained or broken, thereby making sure that one does not take part of the Lord's Supper unworthily. Not surprisingly, this can lead to a very somber ritual.

More recently there has been a shift in many churches, including Mennonite congregations, to a less solemn, less austere, more joyful, and sometimes also more inclusive celebration of communion. *Grace*, with its ambiance of inclusion and friendliness, has increasingly replaced *worthiness*, with its stress on self-examination, testing, holy living, and separation. Jesus's partying, as it were, has replaced the Last Supper as the central motif. At one time there was general agreement among us that the onus was on participants to show that they *could* "worthily" take communion. Today the onus is increasingly falling on us to show why someone *should not* be admitted to the Lord's table.

No doubt this shift has coincided with a general relaxing of the requirements of membership, but it also reflects deep theological convictions. Not surprisingly, it has been accompanied by a painful and sometimes divisive process of discernment, as has been my own experience in various congregations. I have found myself on opposite sides from sisters and brothers whose faith and commitment I respect deeply. In my present congregation new believers are asking hard questions and want clear unambiguous answers. Not least, I am a father of children who love Jesus and think of the church as their home. The stakes are high. At issue is finally not only who participates in communion, but what it means to be a part of the church. We should not expect easy resolution. Because at issue is finally whether we see ourselves as an inclusive generous community,

open to persons at all stages of life and faith, or as an exclusive fellowship of committeed disciples. Most of us want both; but we weigh these values differently. And the practice of communion is one of the flashpoints of debate.

Inclusion or exclusion?

Christian life has always quite properly taken place between two poles: inclusion and separation. The same Jesus who said, "Come to me all who are heavy laden; I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28) also said, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me!" (Matthew 10:38). Believers are caught up in precisely this tension. It is a necessary tension, one we relax or resolve at great cost.

An *inclusive* community, which embraces one and all, is in a good position to reflect a Jesus who goes out of his way to eat and drink with the marginalized. I fear, however, that a church for whom inclusiveness is the last or only word runs the risk of soon having little if anything life-giving to say to those once on the margins. Such a church will find it difficult if not impossible to follow Paul in holding the church accountable to its covenant with its Lord, or to proclaim Jesus's call to take up the cross. Many of us have come to cherish the hospitality of the Gospel but don't know what to do with its demands. Ironically, it is the very generosity of the Gospel that is thereby subverted. This is the new temptation of many Mennonite churches.

On the other hand, a church that is *exclusive* is capable of reflecting the seriousness, even the necessary hardness of Christ's call to discipleship. Such a church of separation and non-conformity can also be a beacon of solidarity and mutual assistance to those within its circle. But, in its commitment to separation from the world, such a church is also always terribly vulnerable to forgetting that there is a wideness to God's mercy and love which defies human imagination. Such a church can forget to be evangelistic. It can mistake exclusivity with faithfulness. For such believers communion can become a moment of extreme *self*-absorption, of *self*-preoccupation, and *self*-justification, rather than a summons to faithfulness to the body of the Christ who gave himself *for others* and who sought out the lost and rejected. This is the old temptation of many Mennonite churches.

We need to be drawn to both poles and we need to resist the pull of both temptations: the church is a living church only to the extent that it reaches out in its embrace of outsiders. But such a church will only be a living church when it finds ways of calling those outsiders clearly and unambiguously to a life of faithfulness, discipleship, and evangelistic solidarity. There is plenty of evidence that it is precisely such churches which are most effective in both nurturing commitment and faith among its members and their offspring and in reaching out to the community beyond. The practice of communion needs to nurture the church in this bi-polar faithfulness.

Children, youths, and other unbaptized participants in our congregational life

We will draw conclusions from this for the question of who partakes of the Lord's table variously. Let me offer my own view. First of all, I consider it to be a very special memory of Jesus that he called the children to himself and blessed them, and that he did so above the objections of his adult followers. More, he held children up as model of what we are to become if we are to be part of the kingdom of God. The church must have ways of communicating this sense of being a treasure to the children in its midst.

At the same time, to be a part of the church is a very serious business. Children are to be valued and nurtured in the church, but that does not mean they are as yet in a position to be members of the church and therefore to participate in the recovenanting ritual of the church—the Lord's Supper.

There is much talk today of the church being a family, and that it includes our children. Yes, the church is a family, but not biologically. To fudge on this question, especially in Mennonite churches, marginalizes anyone who does not have "ethnic" Mennonite roots. Yes, our own families are gifts of God, but my family is not part of the church by virtue of my membership in the church. My children need to know that their own responsible decision as yet awaits them as to whether to respond to the call of Christ and to take up the task of being a member of the church. We do the right thing when we communicate to our children that they are God's gift to us and to the church, and that God loves them and cherishes them beyond measure. We do them no favour, however, when the only decision we leave them is at some point or another to *leave* the church. Our tradition was born in rebellion to the *Volkskirche*—a church which incorporated everyone in the land. This is not our problem today. A *Familienkirche* —a biological family church—is more or less a micro-version of such a church. This *is* our problem today.

The conclusion I would draw from this is that communion is best taken to be a moment of testing and recommitment, and thus properly reserved for members of the church. I do not think, however, that children and other unbaptized persons should be absent. The celebration of communion can be a very important teaching moment in the life of a congregation, for baptized and unbaptized alike. It teaches that to fully participate in the body of Christ is to become a part of a community that is brought into being by nothing other than the grace of God responded to in faith; it also teaches that membership in the church is inseparable from discipleship and mutual accountability. Not being able (yet) to participate in the Lord's supper need not be experienced as exclusion any more than does being present at weddings or graduations. On the contrary, such celebrations can be experienced as something to be anticipated, even yearned for. Communion too can be an event which communicates both the gravity and the joy of membership in the body of Christ, and can thus serve as an evangelistic call both to those who have not

grown up in a church community and, just as importantly, to those who have. I want my children not to feel rejected but to feel invited, enticed. I want them to look forward to full and whole participation in the body of Christ. But I also want them to know that that requires an important choice and decision, one that will mark their whole life.

For us who are already members communion must always be a reminder of God's embrace of us in Jesus Christ, and a clear and unambiguous summons to participate in that generosity. It is not the Lord's Supper if it becomes the basis of arrogance or insensitivity to those not yet fully part of the church. But neither is it the Lord's Supper if it does not put before members and non-members alike, albeit it in different ways, the summons to take up the costly road of individual and communal solidarity with the suffering Christ in the world.

In order to deepen a sense of the meaning and challenge of the Lord's Supper, some congregations carefully maintain the ritual of communion unchanged from one time to the next. Others have creatively found ways of varying their communion celebrations to give full expression to such varied emphases as gratitude for Christ's offering on our behalf, the joy of salvation, and thoughtful recommitment to the way of the cross. Even with such creativity, a limiting of access to the Lord's Supper to baptized members of the church will not and *cannot* fully reflect the wide open hospitality of Jesus' welcoming of children and his eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners. Nor should it be expected to. But if it cannot itself be the party, as it were, communion will remind us of our generous Lord and the price he paid for his generosity, and call us to such wide open hospitality, not only individually but corporately. In other words, our celebration of communion may not be able itself to reenact the first of our two biblical images of eating and drinking. But it is not the Lord's Supper if it does not summon us to living out those images in our own individual and corporate life.

Is there no place for a party in the church?

As to the last point, I have long felt that there is a sacred ritual widespread in Mennonite church culture, even if not acknowledged as such, which gives forceful expression to Jesus's hospitality, to indiscriminate love, the embrace of outsiders, and the meeting of human need. It is very inadequately called "potluck." Why not acknowledge this phenomenon as a gift of God, as a sacred occasion where we can embrace each other, our children, our guests, and perhaps even our enemies? Why not see in this humble event a wonderful opportunity to reenact the multiplication of loaves—or casseroles, as the case may be? Why not see this as an opportunity to imitate Jesus's own table fellowship with those on the margin? This is truly a love feast, so why not call it that? It is an event of pure grace, so why not treat it as a holy sacrament? Might this be the occasion where we honour the holy pole of inclusion, just as the solemnity of the Lord's Supper honours the call to radical fidelity, even separation?

Our eating and drinking together needs to respond to these two quite different and essential needs: the occasion to exercise Jesus's own generosity, and the occasion to be tested on our fidelity to that generosity and its sometimes costly exercise. We need both experiences equally. Perhaps we need more than one holy ritual of eating and drinking together.

C. Arnold Snyder

The Lord's Supper in the Mennonite Tradition

1 Corinthians 11:23–28: *For the tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself: that the Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread and, after giving thanks to God, broke it and said: 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.' In the same way, he took the cup after supper, and said: 'This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.' For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.*

It follows that anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of desecrating the body and blood of the Lord.

All people must test themselves before eating a share of the bread and drinking from the cup.

1 Corinthians 5:6–13: *Your self-satisfaction ill becomes you. Have you never heard the saying, 'A little leaven leavens all the dough?' The old leaven of corruption is working among you. Purge it out, and then you will be bread of a new baking...*

... I now write that you must have nothing to do with any so-called Christian who leads a loose life, or is grasping, or idolatrous, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a swindler. You should not even eat with any such person. What business of mine is it to judge outsiders? God is their judge. You are judges within the fellowship. Root out the evildoer from your community.

Introduction

The general topic that I would like to address is the Lord's Supper. More specifically, I would like to explore some of the ways in which the Lord's Supper has been understood in our church tradition, in order to shed some light on current practice and developments in the way the Lord's Supper is celebrated and understood among us today.

According to a recent survey conducted by the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (see Appendix I), most Mennonite congregations surveyed extended participation in communion to members of any Christian congregation (99% affirmative) and to all baptized believers, including those who had been baptized as

infants (83% affirmative). Our Mennonite churches have come a long way from the time when some Mennonite congregations required rebaptism even for baptized members of other Mennonite churches. More surprising was the high number of respondents who affirmed that communion in their church was also extended to unbaptized adult believers (52% affirmative) and to unbaptized youth and children (23% affirmative). I believe that these latter figures may indicate a significant redefinition-in-the-making of both the nature of the Lord's Supper and of the Mennonite church.

Before getting into the subject matter I would like to say a few words about the uses of history in general, and of Anabaptist history in particular.

A people that forgets its history is very much like a person experiencing amnesia. In both cases, there is a loss of identity and a sense of confusion about who one is in the present. A remembering of the past provides a crucial grounding without which we are pushed about by whatever wind happens to come up.

The remembered past is crucial to a sense of identity, but an emphasis on the past can also been taken too far. The past should not be seen as a "golden age," when everything was wonderful, and when the rules for all time were set. A tradition needs to be appropriated, claimed, again and again. The Christian church is not a museum, or an archive, preserving historical truths like mummies under glass. The church is a living organism. The church came into being at Pentecost with a great rush of wind and Spirit, and it continues to exist on the same basis.

Remembering the past, then, is important in order to ground us in the present, even if the answers given in the past may not respond exactly to today's questions. Looking back to our history and tradition gives us evidence of the Spirit's presence, and gives us clues for the future.

I would hope that in our current discussions, we Mennonites could avoid either extreme. We should avoid saying "we must do exactly what the Anabaptists did" as much as we should avoid saying "what the Anabaptists did no longer matters." Our tradition does matter, even if it is not a binding law for all time, because it has formed us as a church, and brought us to the present.

When we discuss how we understand and practice the Lord's Supper, I believe that we really are talking about a much larger question, namely: How do we understand the church today. This is not a trivial conversation, by any means, and I join in it in fear and trembling, asking that we be led by the Holy Spirit of God, and not by our own prejudices.

Some historical comments

In 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 we read the apostle Paul's description of the tradition that was handed on to him, which he is now handing on to believers in Corinth. What he describes

is Jesus's Last Supper with the disciples, and what Jesus said on that occasion.

Embedded in Paul's description are two very different interpretations about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. The one interpretation concentrates on the words "This is my Body." The other interpretation emphasizes the words "Do this in remembrance of me." Our own tradition, as I'm sure you know, emphasizes the remembrance aspect of the Supper.

1. A Real Presence

It is difficult to know how the very earliest church interpreted the words of institution we read in Paul. We do know that very early, by the year 200 AD, Christians in Rome taught that at the Lord's Supper a mysterious union of Christ and the Church took place. There was a mysterious "presence" of Christ when believers celebrated the Supper together.

Over time this idea of a mysterious "real presence" of Christ at the celebration of the Supper was replaced by a more mechanical notion. The medieval church came to believe that ordained priests had the unique capacity to make Christ really present in the bread and the wine. In the Catholic mass of the high middle ages, the priest would turn his back to the congregation when he said the words of institution. He would raise the host, and say "Hoc est corpus meum," or "This is my body." This sounded like "hocus pocus" to the unlearned. At that "hocus pocus" moment, Christ was supposed to physically (albeit mysteriously) take up residence in the bread and the wine. A "transubstantiation" had occurred. This definition was finalized in the year 1214, at the Fourth Lateran council.

2. A Memorial

Three hundred years later, by the time of the Reformation, there had been many dissenting voices in the church. Some theologians and lay believers objected strenuously to the doctrine of transubstantiation. There was a counter-movement that was especially strong in the Netherlands. It argued that Jesus never meant to be taken literally when he said "This is my Body." What he meant was something like "This bread that I am pointing to *signifies* my body."

The bread is a symbol, these people argued, and that is why Jesus then said, immediately following "Do this in remembrance of me." So the Supper is a symbolic eating and drinking, with no real presence of Christ at all. Believers announce Christ's death when they celebrate, and they remember Christ's sacrifice, but Jesus is in heaven, sitting next to God, and not in the bread.

The Anabaptists agreed with this latter critique. They liked to use the image of the elements being like the sign outside an inn, advertising wine within. The sign is important, but should not be confused with the wine. It certainly would not satisfy thirst!

At least four different views on the Supper emerged among the reforming groups of the sixteenth century.

Martin Luther stayed closest to the Catholic view, although he rejected the word "transubstantiation." He said that the word wasn't biblical. Nevertheless, Luther did insist

that the body and blood of Christ were materially present *along with* the elements, so much so, that an unbeliever who partook would in fact be "chewing the body and drinking the blood" of Christ.

Huldrych Zwingli, Andreas Karlstadt, and the Anabaptists took the memorialist path. They held that there was no real presence of Christ either in or with the elements. The bread was only bread; the wine only wine. There was a communing by faith only. The Supper was a sign or symbol of something spiritually real, and a memorial of Christ's sacrifice. Some people have described this position as the "real absence" view.

John Calvin also denied a physical presence, but he insisted that there was a spiritual "real presence" of Christ along with the celebration of the Supper. Calvin stood somewhere between Zwingli and Luther on this question.

The Spiritualists denied a physical presence, but went further and insisted that no elements at all should be used. They held that Christ wished to institute a purely spiritual communion. Bringing bread and wine into the picture only confused things.

The Anabaptist understanding of the Lord's Supper: A sign of what?

The Anabaptists understood the Supper in a symbolic way: it was an eating and a drinking that stood for something else. What was the "else" that it stood for? What symbolic meanings did the Anabaptists give to the Supper?

The first thing to say is that in the Anabaptist tradition, the Lord's Supper was never understood in isolation. It was closely connected with two other ordinances that were central to the formation of Anabaptist and Mennonite churches: baptism and the ban. I will say a bit more about these connections in a moment.

In a writing of 1552, Menno Simons identified three things that the Lord's Supper pointed to, or symbolized and meant. This is as good a guide as any for us to outline the teaching of the Anabaptist tradition, which became the Mennonite tradition. Menno said that the Supper signified a proclamation and memorial of Christ's sacrifice, unity in the church, and communion with Christ.[1]

1. A proclamation and memorial of Christ's sacrifice

The first meaning Menno identified is the one we have already mentioned. For Menno, the Supper is to be, first of all, a Proclamation of Christ's death (that is, Christ's death is both announced and remembered by a celebration of the Supper). Negatively it means that there is no "real presence" in the elements; positively it means that the Supper is an occasion to remember and testify to our faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We can say that this is the "vertical" or theological meaning of the Supper for Menno. The Supper "points" upward.

2. Unity in the church

The second meaning Menno identifies for the Supper will detain us a little longer. Menno says that the Supper is a sign of unity in the church. Menno here quotes 1 Corin-

thians 10:17: "For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread." Here Menno speaks to the important "horizontal" meaning of the Supper.

At this point we are getting very close to the nub of the important issue of what symbolic value the bread and the wine are supposed to have for the church as such. If the horizontal meaning of the Supper is unity, and if it is a symbol of inclusiveness, then shouldn't the Supper *include* all those whom we consider to be a part of the church family? Shouldn't the Supper be as widely inclusive and uniting a symbol as possible?

In fact, this may be one way of interpreting the unitive symbolism of the Supper, but it isn't the way the Anabaptists interpreted it.

Dirk Philips, a co-worker with Menno Simons and an elder in the church, used an ancient image to describe this inclusive, uniting symbol:

For as the bread is made of many grains broken and ground together, and out of many grains has come one loaf of bread in which every little kernel has lost its individual body and form; and likewise as the grapes, by changing their form become the body of a common wine and drink, so also must all Christians be united with Christ and with one another.[2]

We should notice at least two things: one, the Supper is supposed to be a strong horizontal symbol—pointing not just to Christ the Saviour, but also to the body of Christ on earth, the church. Second, notice how radical an image of unity Dirk Philips uses here: he says that *individual* grains have to be broken and ground; individuals have to lose their particular individual natures, in order to be ground into flour and baked into a common loaf. Likewise the grapes need to be crushed individually first, and only after that become wine.

So for Dirk and other Anabaptists, the bread and the wine are symbols of inclusivity, but it is an inclusivity of a very severe and serious kind. If anyone was not ready to be ground and crushed, ready to lose their individual shapes, they weren't ready to be included in the larger whole. This is inclusivity of a very demanding sort. In fact, some Anabaptists said that giving up one's individuality and submitting to the group was just a preparation for the greatest test, which was losing one's life altogether in martyrdom.

Part of "losing oneself" also meant being ready to share with those in need. It was very common for alms to be gathered for those in need at the celebration of the Supper.

For the Anabaptists, the inclusivity of the Supper presupposed that something had happened earlier, namely that the persons who were going to celebrate the Supper had already committed themselves to being "crushed" by their adult baptism.

All Anabaptists assumed that the Supper was reserved for previously baptized adults. It isn't hard to see why. Our church began as an "adult-baptizing" movement. Membership in the church was supposed to be limited to those who could make an adult statement to a serious commitment of faith, which meant a commitment to follow Christ

with one's life. No infant or child could do this. So baptism and full membership in the church was to be for adults only. It followed that the Supper was only for full members and adults.

The Schleitheim Articles said this explicitly already in 1527: "...all those who desire to break the one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ and those who wish to drink of one drink in remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, they must beforehand be united in the one body of Christ, that is the congregation of God, whose head is Christ, and that by baptism" (Yoder, Legacy, 37).

So it was that for the Anabaptists, the inclusivity symbolized by the Supper was an inclusivity for adult members, who had committed themselves in all seriousness to the community first by baptism.

3. Communion with Christ

The third and final meaning Menno Simons identified with the Lord's Supper was that it symbolized a communion with Christ. What Menno meant by this "communion" was that those who partook of the Supper were testifying by this act that they also were leading pious, unblamable lives of discipleship—that they were "in communion." Menno said that if anyone wanted to partake of the Supper "rightly," such a person would have to be "an upright, pious, and godly Christian." For that reason, Menno said, "prove yourself according to the doctrine of Paul before you eat of this bread and drink of this cup..."

The "doctrine of Paul" Menno refers to here is found in 1 Corinthians 11:28: "All people must test themselves before eating a share of the bread and drinking from the cup."

This third point brought up by Menno points to individual and horizontal meanings of the Supper.

First we are supposed to look within and examine ourselves to see if we are in fact living in communion with Christ, as disciples should be with their master. Are we following? Are we in communion with the Head? Are we running the race the way we promised that we would with our baptisms?

In this sense, the Supper witnesses to a prior time of self-examination; before we come to the Supper, we are to take time to check again on the mature, adult baptismal commitment we made. And if our consciences are clear, we can then partake of the Supper "worthily." The Supper symbolizes, in this sense, that those who are partaking of it are in communion with the Head.

It is clear here again that for the Anabaptists the Supper was not something meant for the unbaptized or for infants or children: they could not be expected to promise a life of discipleship, nor could they be expected to "examine themselves" to see how they were doing.

Secondly, the question of discipleship and pious and upright living had not only an individual meaning of self-examination, but also a horizontal, communal meaning. The

Supper brought into focus the matter of the ban—church discipline.

The Anabaptists were not satisfied to leave it up to individuals to determine if they were in communion with Christ the head, and the body of Christ, the church. Members of the body were supposed to watch over one another, and help one another stay on the narrow way.

The Schleitheim Articles, for example, connect church discipline explicitly with the Supper: those who have been baptized into the One Body of Christ need to admonish one another if they see someone falling into sin, twice privately and then before the entire congregation. Schleitheim says "this shall be done... before the breaking of bread, so that we may all in one spirit and in one love break and eat from one bread and drink from one cup."[3]

Menno Simons also connected the Lord's Supper with the ban. He was extremely concerned that the church be kept pure. There was danger, he said in one place, that one scabby sheep would infect the whole flock. So those who gave signs of no longer living in communion with Christ were to be excluded from the Supper by other members of the body.

Menno said that the only baptized members who were to be excluded from the communion of the church were those who had already separated *themselves* from Christ's communion by their false beliefs or impious actions. But if they didn't recognize this of their own account, by self-examination, then the church had to do it for them (Matthew 18:15–18).

So the Lord's Supper was a sign not only that individuals had examined themselves and felt themselves to be in communion, but also that the congregation as a whole had examined one another, and felt itself to be in unity. And again, this was not a matter that could possibly include infants or children, but was something that only adults could do.

Conclusion

In this brief sketch I hope I have given you an accurate picture of how the Supper was understood by our parents in the faith. For them the Supper was only symbolic: the bread and the wine did not embody any divinity. But the Supper did point to spiritual realities, and testified to those realities. The Supper pointed to: Christ and heaven; the testimony of the church in the world; and the "good consciences" of individual disciples, members of the Body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper was first a memorial; the bread and wine did not contain a real presence, but they did point upward to Christ, and his atoning death. Those who celebrated the Supper together were testifying to their faith in Christ and announcing that faith. This would exclude children, and those who had not yet come to a mature faith.

Second, the Supper was sign of unity in the church, namely among those who had previously accepted adult baptism. Again the symbolic eating and drinking pointed to a

deeper spiritual unity among those who had testified publicly to their personal faith by water baptism.

Third, the Supper was a sign of a good conscience, namely that all who partook in it had examined themselves individually and collectively, and found themselves to be living sincere lives of discipleship. Those who partook of the Supper were those who had submitted to church discipline, and had not been found wanting.

This is where we come from; this is the tradition we inherited. What do we do with it now?

Our parents in the faith definitely saw the church as an inclusive family, but it was a family that had become a family by "adoption," by adult choice, not by virtue of birth into the community. It was a family that could only become a family when its members made a serious, adult commitment. Baptism, the Ban, and the Supper all took their place within this family of commitment as symbols of inclusivity and belonging.

But that was then, and this is now. Our churches no longer define our boundaries with such a heavy emphasis on commitment, submission to the whole, purity, discipleship, and separation from the world. When the Anabaptists defined the church, they looked to the boundaries, and they were very clear about the limits of their symbols of inclusion. We may wish to ask:

Was the Anabaptist understanding too "exclusive?"

Should twentieth century Mennonites redefine the nature of the church altogether?

Is adult commitment no longer the foundation of our church?

Do we wish to say, rather, that the church is a family of birth and nurture that includes equally infants born into it and children growing up in it?

Granting that every generation has to redefine the church for its time and place, we should be aware that we stand on the verge of a dramatic shift in the way we Mennonites have defined our church from its beginnings—an understanding now almost 500 years old. In fact, some redefinition of our church boundaries has already happened, and more is likely to happen. How do we think that the Spirit is leading us at this time?

Are we prepared to start over again at such a basic, principled level?

Do we want to say that the Supper should not imply a prior adult baptism?

Do we mean, then, that infants should be baptized too, and that the church really isn't constituted by adult baptism any more?

Do we mean that there should be no mutual accountability in our churches any more?

And so on.

If we tug at the thread of the Supper, lots of other threads come undone as well, because the whole was made up of an interlocking weave, which taken together made up the cloth, the nature, of the church as our tradition has understood it.

May the Spirit of God lead us and guide us as we try to live according to the truth in our time and place.

Notes

[1] Klaassen, Wlater, ed. *Anabaptism in Outline. Selected Primary Sources* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1981), p. 209.
[2] *Ibid*, pp. 207–8.
[3] *Ibid*, p. 215.

HARRY HUEBNER

Church Discipline: Is it Still Possible?

Introduction

Today the practice of church discipline is often frowned upon. The possible exception involves cases of sexual misconduct—and here it is deemed most appropriate when it involves church leaders. Why has church discipline fallen on hard times? Let me risk the unsettling suggestion that this is so because we are not united in our understanding of the practical implications of the Christian life. In those cases where we agree on something that is clearly wrong, such as sexual misconduct by church leaders, we readily accept church discipline. This development is troubling because it suggests that the reason we have difficulty with church discipline is because we are not agreed on our identity as a Christian community. Our discomfort only increases when we realize that with respect to sexual misconduct our convictions are strong at the same time (and often in the same way) as is the case in secular society around us.

Church discipline is even less popular when applied to church doctrine. My guess is that in most CMC churches it is extremely difficult to be "disciplined" for incorrect doctrine, unless, of course, the holder of such doctrine is insufferably obnoxious about it. I have heard people quietly express quite unorthodox beliefs about God, Jesus, sin and salvation, cross and resurrection, heaven and hell, church—beliefs that are explicitly contradictory to our official faith statements. Here are some examples I recall: "I believe that God is 'the best' inside every person," "I don't believe in the resurrection," "I don't believe in heaven and hell," "I don't believe that God is acting in this world today."

Officially we believe in church discipline for both false practice and false doctrine. Our 1996 *Confession of Faith* says, in part:

> We believe that the practice of discipline in the church is a sign of God's offer of forgiveness and transforming grace to believers who are moving away from faithful discipleship or who have been overtaken by sin. Discipline is intended to return erring brothers and sisters from sin, to enable them to return to right relationship with God, and to restore them to fellowship in the church. It also gives integrity of the church's witness and contributes to the credibility of the gospel message in the world. (55)

The statement then goes on to emphasize that the church has divinely mandated authority to discern right from wrong, to forgive repentant sinners and to withhold forgiveness where there is no repentance. It goes on to suggest that in becoming members of

the church we declare our willingness to give and accept counsel on matters of doctrine and conduct.

There is obvious distance between our practice and our confession regarding church discipline. And while this may not surprise us, this essay is a modest effort to stimulate discussion toward recapturing the power of an important church doctrine and practice; that is, it is intended to foster the identity required to make church discipline intelligible to us.

What does 'church discipline' mean?

We most frequently (mis)use the phrase "church discipline," as I have already demonstrated in introducing the topic, to designate an act which *punishes* unfaithful church members for wrong practice or doctrine. That is, we tend to believe that church discipline is church punishment. And indeed there are many examples of actions taken by the church against members which have been acts of punishment, or which have appeared like and felt like it. But at the core this is not what the phrase means.

The word "discipline" is rooted in the word discipleship; that is, following after someone else, training oneself in the way of another or learning how to become a person one is not yet. That is, discipline is really synonymous with training or discipling. We use the term in exactly this way in other contexts. Consider the notion of an academic *discipline.* Students learn sociology or mathematics by learning the language and practice of other sociologists and mathematicians; that is, by becoming fluent in the subject matter. In the process of learning these skills (excellences), students need teachers who are the "enforcers" of the discipline; they do not allow students to "get away with" answers (behaviours) that do not fit the discipline. Careful training is indispensable for becoming a good scholar. When a teacher "fails a student" it can be seen as (and it can certainly feel like) punishment for the student's lack of performance, but in reality it is an acknowledgement that the student has not done the necessary training in order to become competent in the area of studies. And if there were no standards of excellence, it would not be possible for students to become good.

Notice that we can speak of discipline only if there is a well understood and accepted identity to the subject matter. The reason a math teacher can say to her student "this answer is wrong, and here is what you must do to get it right," is because there is agreement within the mathematics guild on what is right and what is not. If every answer were equally acceptable there could be no discipline. There would then only be diversity of expressions. It is therefore no accident that there is greatest loyalty (and devotion to the field) by professionals where the training is most specific and uniform, like medicine and engineering. This makes "profession discipline," as exercised by medical associations, for example, both necessary and possible. Lest we think that the analogy works only with academic and professional training, consider a more action-oriented context. Baseball players must go through enormously rigorous exercises (disciplines) in order to

become good at playing the game. The coach has them do drills and practices daily, developing forms and techniques to draw out the talents of each player. In the end, some players "make the team" and others do not. All would agree that only the truly disciplined ones are the good players. And upon reflection usually players are grateful for the hard training that made them good.

Now these are analogies intended to help us understand church discipline. The exercises of the church are, of course, very different from those of math and baseball. The training that goes into becoming a faithful Christian has to do with activities such as prayer, worship, Bible reading, studying the faith, singing, meditation, forgiving, loving, and the list could continue for a while. But as disciplines they are no different than batting practice or agility exercises in baseball. Unless you do them regularly you don't get good at it.

We should not make the mistake, however, of assuming that this way of speaking about the Christian faith makes it a solely human enterprise. That is, this is not "salvation by works." When we look carefully at the list of disciplines mentioned we notice that they are all activities that open us to the transforming power of God. As Christians we believe that only as we open ourselves to God's mercy can we become the kind of people we are called to become in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8–10). But it is these "opening exercises" that we must learn, especially in an era when opening ourselves to others is not in vogue.

Church discipline and believers baptism

There is a special connection between church discipline and believers baptism. Recall Jesus's commissioning of the disciples to "Go... and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20a). Mennonites practice believers baptism not because of what we believe about the right of every adult to make a fully informed free choice, or because of the inability of pre-adults to make such choices, but because of what we believe about the church. The church is the social embodiment of life patterned after Jesus the Christ. That is to say, we believe that it is at least as much the case that the church makes the Christian as it is that Christians make the church. If it were only the latter then there could be no church discipline, or at least it would be impositional and therefore highly inappropriate.

Let me put this another way. The Bible is really quite clear that those who serve Yahweh are particular people—people who not only *are* different but who are also *seen to be* different (Deuteronomy 6; I Peter 2:1–10). We are called to look at life differently, deal with conflict differently, relate to others differently, and interpret events differently. And what shapes that difference are not our own insights or interests but our commitment to Yahweh's rule which is given (revealed) to us. In order to know the specifics of this rule, we are given specific "code signs" to live by—the Ten Commandments, wise say-

ings, prophesies, the Sermon on the Mount, Paul's advice to the early churches, and many, many stories of faithfulness and failure. But what is just as important for coming to know Yahweh's rule, is that we are invited into an exciting adventure; one in which God wants to lead a people into a whole new way of living and being, one which can make the very reign of heaven apparent on earth (Matthew 6:10).

The Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition has taken our invitation to Yahweh's reign to mean that the church consists of those who are actively committed to this vision. Hence believers baptism has been the practice among us. It is a sign that the church wants to be a particular kind of body—one rooted in the very body of Christ. If we were to baptize our children we would indicate that we believe not in the church as a concrete alternative social structure but as an invisible spiritual reality, comfortably intermixing the explicitly committed with those not so committed. No one should argue that all in the Mennonite church are truly faithful, whereas in other churches they are not. However, our tradition has seen it as the task of the church to work at being/becoming a people worthy of the name Christian. Hence the importance of the disciplines (training) necessary to make us faithful.

A common New Testament metaphor for church discipline is that of binding and loosing (Matthew 16:13–19). Other similar, and I believe parallel, biblical images are Exodus/Sinai, retain sins and forgive sins (John 20:23) and perhaps even cross/resurrection. The Bible invites us into a view of church as a covenanting community with the authority and honour to represent God's reign of salvation. In it we can learn to overcome the powers of sin (Mark 8:34–35) as we bind ourselves to a life of faithfulness. Hence there is both a binding to the way of Christ which begins at baptism and through regular discipline by self and others carries through the entire church life, as well as a loosing (freeing) which entails a celebrations of the gifts one brings to the larger community in worship and service.

Church discipline and the call to subversion

I have suggested that today we are ill at ease with church discipline. I want now to suggest that this is as it should be. However, we ought to make sure that our discomfort is for the right reasons. It is not sufficient to object to church discipline on the grounds that we do not like others telling us what to do and think. Being told how to live is something Christians should be used to; after all, we are precisely the kind of people who are trying to think and do what another (Jesus) has already thought and done for us. And herein lies what ought to be the real source of our discomfort with church discipline—Jesus. I suspect that Jesus, were he living his radical life in our churches today, may well be excommunicated. At least he would be asked to tone it down. We may well send two or three people to talk to him about his extremism. "Sell what you have and give it to the poor." "Love your enemy." "Be servants of one another." "You hypocrites," to religious leaders. Our response would be, "Come on, Jesus, give us a break! You are far too critical.

Lighten up and be positive."

Jesus was a subversive force within the Jewish establishment. What does this mean for Christ followers? Are we not, like Christ, and with the prophets of old, also called to be subversive (prophetic) people, even to our own communities? And if so, how ought subversive people to deal with subversives among them? It seems to me that if we refuse the legitimacy of this question we make church discipline out to be merely a tool for conformity for conformity sake. And this is the worst kind of Christian hypocrisy. The issue should not be conformity but embodiment of the teaching of Jesus. This must be the yardstick for both the *how* and the *when* of church discipline.

In the past, CMC church bishops were the ones to deal with the correction side of church discipline. That era is long gone. Nor was it a particular good model to deal with the prophets among us since this clashed directly with the role that was conferred upon the bishop. Yet with the passing of this era we have not been very successful in finding a suitable new office for this task. If discipline is to be more than an exercise in coercively maintaining the status quo, we need to find new church structures for distinguishing true from false prophecies among us. For we dare not ignore nor excommunicate our prophets.

Principles and suggestions

By way of summary I propose the following two principles and four suggestions for our consideration:

Principle #1. The *goal* of church discipline is not only to seek conformity but to seek concrete ways of "signing" the Word of God. The goal is therefore faithfulness, forgiveness and restoration (Matthew 18:15–22).

Principle #2. The *intention and means* of church discipline is redemptive. When members are faithful, prayerful and memberly support should be extended to them and when they transgress, speaking the truth in the spirit of gentleness should be offered (Galatians 6:1–3).

Suggestion #1. That the *faith teaching* side of church discipline be given more attention. And here I wish particularly to commend a renewed emphasis on the *catechism of church doctrine.* With the affirmations of diversity which the post-modern spirit has engendered upon us, it is very difficult to come to know what it means to be Christian without explicit instruction. But this is not only so for those seeking baptism. We need creative new variations of the tradition where the entire congregation participates in the doctrinal learning process by having the Sunday morning sermon follow (at least occasionally) catechism topics.

Suggestion #2. That the *faith living* side of church discipline be given more attention. One of the difficulties we have in our churches is that we address matters of church practice only when they become problems. Yet how to deal with our enemies, or our spouses, or how to relate across gender lines, are matters we should constantly be training

ourselves in. We need a *catechism of church practice* integrated with our catechism of church doctrine which the church would present to those seeking baptism as well as to the general membership. This document would not be a list of dos and don'ts but it would be a conscientious effort to address the practical implications of the faith for Christians today.

Suggestion #3. That we work at developing better *structures of accountability within congregations*. While it is true that at baptism every person receives the obligation of giving and receiving counsel (Matthew 18:15ff), unless a congregation has clear structures of who is responsible for ensuring that we hold each other accountable, we will foster the absence of this practice rather than its presence. And unless people are afforded proper structures of advocacy and protection, this practice cannot take place under today's climate of individual space.

Suggestion #4. That we work at developing better *structures of accountability between congregations.* Because Jesus attempted to discipline the religious establishment itself, we must recognize that on occasion the whole congregation needs to receive counsel from outside. And for this the larger church body is required. Let us ask the individual congregations to give the CMC permission to develop such structures.

Conclusion

Recently Dan Epp-Thiessen, the pastor at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, ON, reminded us of what Rudy Regehr (long time registrar at Canadian Mennonite Bible College and more recently secretary of the Congregational Resources Commission) used to say, namely, "as individuals we are all heretics." We could probably add that "as individuals we are all scoundrels." We need each other to help us be good people. Yet the church is a human institution and hence it too can go astray. Therefore, the congregation must be open to the counsel of the larger church and together to our prophets and sages. We, individually and collectively, must be open to ourselves being cleansed. No church can be so sure of its own convictions that it can afford to ignore the counsel of others, and no church can afford to lack the courage of its convictions as it disciplines (trains) its members in Christian living.

> *Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ* (Ephesians 4:15).

Appendices

I: Church Membership Questionnaire

II: For Further Reading

III: The Authors

APPENDIX I

Church Membership Questionnaire

This questionnaire was drawn up by members of the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and sent to congregations in early 1996, with instructions to complete it and to return it by 19 April 1996. Over 100 responses came in. The following is a compilation of the results. The percentage of returned surveys marked 'Yes' in each category is indicated.

Managing Congregational Membership

Instructions

1. Respond to all statements by circling "yes" or "no." If your congregation does not have formal policies in the areas contained in this study, please fill out the questionnaire on the basis of your congregation's understood assumptions and/or traditional practices.
2. Circle *all* the options that apply to your situation. *We realize that congregational life and practice are complex and that some answers may not appear too consistent.*
3. Please take advantage of the "Comments" space. Feel free to use point form.It would be helpful to include relevant portions of policy documents, (e.g. Constitution).

NOTE: If your congregation has developed original worship resources or congregational materials used in the practice of joining membership, membership transfer or release, baptism, communion and commissioning persons to serve in the church, we would encourage you to include them with your response. Please indicate if we have your permission to include them in future additions of the *Worship Anthology*.

PART I – Congregational Membership

1. We have a formal policy in place which spells out what is meant by "membership"	Yes	88%
The policy includes details regarding: (*reminder: circle all those that apply*)		
Baptism requirements	Yes	98%
Membership expectations	Yes	93%
Procedures for the transfer of membership	Yes	80%
Procedures for the removal from membership	Yes	66%
Other: (*please specify*)		
2. We are intentional about clarifying congregational membership	Yes	83%
Our practice includes:		
Sermons specific to the meaning of membership	Yes	60%
Issues pertaining to membership are placed on the congregational meeting agenda	Yes	72%
Discussion at the minister/ministerial level	Yes	88%
Other: (*please explain*)		
3. We have membership renewal celebrations at regular intervals	Yes	14%
If "yes" how often?		
(*Reminder: If your congregation has developed original worship materials we encourage you to share them!*)		
4. We publish a yearly register of members and participants	Yes	63%
5. Persons listed in our church registry are identified as members or non-members	Yes	65%
6. We require persons to be members of the congregation before they are allowed to:		
Elected to an office	Yes	73%
Serve on a committee or board	Yes	40%
Teach Sunday School	Yes	10%
Be Youth Sponsors	Yes	23%
Be Club Leaders	Yes	10%
Usher	Yes	15%
Preach	Yes	25%
Speak at congregational meetings	Yes	14%
Vote at congregational meetings	Yes	74%
Other:		
7. We have a policy of <u>follow-up</u> for inactive members	Yes	47%
8. We have a tradition that guides our <u>follow-up</u> of inactive members	Yes	49%
9. For inactive members who continue to reside in the vicinity of our congregation, we have a policy/tradition which includes:		
Assigning a deacon(s) to visit	Yes	56%
Expecting our pastor(s) to make contact	Yes	80%
Writing letters	Yes	52%
Utilizing networks they may have in our congregation	Yes	71%
Discussion at congregational meetings	Yes	27%
Other:		
10. We have a policy of <u>release</u> from membership for <u>inactive</u> members	Yes	44%
For non-attendance	Yes	33%
For non-response to contacts from congregation	Yes	45%
Other:		

11. We have a policy of release from membership for members not in fellowship with the congregation	Yes	29%
For issues related to lifestyle (e.g. divorce)	Yes	23%
For issues related to theology (e.g. non-pacifist)	Yes	14%
Other:		
12. We have a policy of release from membership for inactive members who continue to reside in our community	Yes	32%
A policy that we strictly adhere to	Yes	4%
That is flexible in considering each individual case	Yes	60%
That is applied equally to those continue to reside in our community as to those who have relocated	Yes	34%
Other:		
13. The time frame for dealing with inactive members is a key factor	Yes	49%
Our practice would indicate that an adequate time frame is:		
Within 3 years 50%		
More than 4 years 50%		
Each case needs to be considered unique (please share current examples)	Yes	95%
Other:		
14. We make an effort to inform the congregation about the release of members	Yes	90%
Worship-service	Yes	53%
Bulletin announcement	Yes	76%
Congregational meeting	Yes	71%
Other:		

TRANSFER

15. We have a policy for persons transferring their membership into our congregation	Yes	96%
This requires:		
Public testimony	Yes	83%
Participation in membership classes	Yes	27%
A letter of transfer verifying the person is in good standing in their former congregation	Yes	94%
No communication from their former congregation	Yes	11%
Other:		
16. We have a policy for persons transferring their membership out of our congregation	Yes	90%
It includes:		
Public announcement	Yes	86%
A letter of transfer verifying the person is in good standing from our congregation	Yes	98%
No communication from our congregation	Yes	5%
Other:		
17. We view membership transfer from congregations within our vicinity differently than those who move into our community from away	Yes	14%
When persons transfer their membership into our congregation from within our vicinity, we contact their previous congregation	Yes	76%
We expect the person requesting transfer to clarify the reason for transfer	Yes	85%
Other:		

18. We have a policy of follow-up for members who have relocated — Yes 55%
    We keep in touch by sending church mailings to their new address — Yes 71%
    For approximately how long: _____
    We encourage them to find a new congregational family — Yes 96%
    We write letters of introduction to Mennonite congregations in the area — Yes 26%
    Relocating includes a period of adjustment and "church shopping" — Yes 95%
    We consider an adequate time frame for relocated members to transfer their membership could be:
    - Within 3 years
    - More than 4 years
    - Each case needs to be considered unique
    - Other:

19. We would appreciate receiving letters of introduction from Mennonite congregations when their members relocate in our vicinity — Yes 94%
20. We are concerned that relocating members find another Mennonite congregation — Yes 84%
21. Please weight the following according to their importance:

	1=least important	2	3	4	5=-very important
We feel our approach to dealing with inactive members is adequate.	8%	18%	46%	20%	8%
We would welcome discussion at conference level on developing a consistent policy for dealing with inactive members.	9%	12%	15%	42%	23%
Keeping congregational membership lists up to date generates controversy.	26%	17%	26%	22%	10%
Keeping congregational membership lists up to date strengthens the meaning of church membership.	3%	6%	20%	41%	30%
Keeping congregational membership lists up to date tells us how we're doing in evangelism.	19%	25%	30%	16%	11%
The motive for reviewing our membership lists is for conference accounting.	26%	25%	25%	18%	6%
The motive for reviewing our membership lists is because active participation in a congregation is essential to the meaning of membership.	3%	6%	16%	36%	40%
Membership lists are important for reasons of posterity (e.g. genealogies).	20%	22%	34%	19%	5%
The responsibility for membership rests with the individual member.	5%	9%	25%	40%	21%
The responsibility for membership rests with the congregation.	2%	5%	22%	43%	27%
The responsibility for membership rests with the conference.	44%	38%	8%	8%	3%

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

22. What is your congregation's current membership?
    Of these, approximately how many are:
    Non-resident?
    Young adults, college students, missionaries?
    Adults (including retired)
23. How many non-members attend your worship-service 6 or more times per year?
    Of these, approximately how many are:
    Children and youth (under 18)
    Young adults (18-35)
    Adults (35-60)
    Retirees (61+)
24. Over the past 5 years, what is the average number of persons joining your congregation
    Transferring their membership from your congregation
    Released from membership
    "Removed" from the membership list through death
25. Are your membership records stored in an archives? Yes 39%
    If your congregation is not already storing its records in an archives, the Heritage Centre is interested in providing this service for you. Feel free to contact Lawrence Klippenstein at the CMC offices for details.

PART II – Baptism

1. Baptism in our congregation necessarily includes membership Yes 90%
   Comments:
2. Baptism does not necessarily require membership in a local congregation Yes 84%
   Comments:
3. Which describes your congregation's practice of baptism?
   - We practice only one mode of baptism Yes 72%
   - We have practiced several modes of baptism Yes 30%
   - We accept other modes of baptism Yes 98%
   - We baptize persons solely upon confession of faith Yes 85%
   - We assign a mentor or sponsor to each baptismal candidate Yes 38%
   - We require baptismal candidates to take catechism classes or membership classes Yes 95%
   - Other/Comments:
4. We receive persons into membership who were baptized
   - Upon their confession of faith only Yes 80%
   - As infants upon confirmation of faith Yes 65%
   - As infants upon successful completion of membership classes Yes 57%
   - For persons baptized as infants, we require re-baptism Yes 28%
   - Other/Comments:
5. Which of the following describes the purpose(s) of conducting catechism/membership classes?
   - Preparation to assume the responsibility of membership Yes 96%
   - Disciplining candidates in the tenets of Anabaptist-Mennonite faith Yes 94%
   - Ascertaining whether candidates are spiritually mature Yes 79%
   - Other/Comments:

6. Persons seeking baptism are expected to give a testimony of faith — Yes 98%
   - Before the congregation — Yes 94%
   - Before the ministerial and/or deacons — Yes 56%
   - In writing, under special circumstances — Yes 71%
   - Other/Comments:
7. We have baptismal worship-services:
   - Only at specific times during the year (e.g. Pentecost) — Yes 33%
   - Whenever there is a completed baptismal class of candidates — Yes 78%
   - Whenever persons request — Yes 81%
   - Other:
8. What are the ages of the persons baptized in your congregation in the last 5 years:
   - 12 & under — 1%
   - 13-18 — 35%
   - 19-35 — 39%
   - 35-59 — 19%
   - 60 & over — 5%
9. Respond to the following statements by circling the appropriate number:

   1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=mixed opinion 4=agree 5=strongly agree.

   The congregation should actively encourage persons in the congregation to be baptized.

   2% .75% 8% 31% 59%

   Catechism or Membership classes are required for baptism.

   2% 2% 12% 21% 65%

   Membership in a local congregation is integral to our understanding of baptism.

   3% 2% 6% 25% 64%

   Baptism and membership are related but different issues.

   18% 21% 16% 28% 16%

   Baptism is a covenant made by the individual with the church.

   8% 3% 10% 44% 34%

   Baptism is a covenant made by the church with the individual.

   7% 14% 11% 35% 33%

   Baptism is a sign of congregational approval.

   16% 23% 20% 20% 21%

   Baptism is a sign of spiritual maturity.

   10% 20% 34% 20% 16%

PART III – Communion

1. The practice of communion in our congregation is open to:
   - Members of our congregation only — Yes 2%
   - Members of our congregation in good standing — Yes 77%
   - Members of like-minded congregations — Yes 87%
   - Members of any Christian congregation — Yes 99%
   - All baptized believers, including those baptized as infants — Yes 83%
   - All baptized believers, including those baptized as infants only if confirmed — Yes 46%
   - Unbaptized adult believers — Yes 52%
   - Unbaptized youth and children — Yes 23%
   - Other:

2. The practice of communion in our congregation is preceded by an admonition		
For self-examination in the weeks prior to communion	Yes	57%
For self-examination on the day of communion	Yes	86%
For reconciliation and forgiveness in the weeks prior to communion	Yes	53%
For reconciliation and forgiveness on the day of communion	Yes	72%
Other:		
3. The practice of communion in our congregation:		
Includes time for sharing and confession	Yes	50%
Is integrated into carefully planned worship-services	Yes	90%
Includes some form of mutual acknowledgment, e.g. by giving a nod of affirmation	Yes	45%
Is preceded by foot washing	Yes	10%
Is usually served in the morning worship-service	Yes	73%
Is usually served at a special worship-service (e.g. evening)	Yes	40%
Other:		
4. Communion is celebrated:		
Monthly	Yes	4%
Quarterly	Yes	69%
Twice a year	Yes	36%
On special occasions	Yes	75%
In small group settings (e.g. Bible study or ministerial groups)	Yes	19%
In small group settings outside of our church building	Yes	39%
Other:		
5. Communion is conducted:		
Only by ordained ministers	Yes	39%
By ministers and deacons	Yes	82%
By persons appointed to the responsibility (e.g. by worship committee)	Yes	44%
As a community event with participants serving each other	Yes	34%
Other:		
6. Our congregation seeks to include children (13 & under) in the celebration of communion:	Yes	59%
By explaining communion during the children's time or from the pulpit	Yes	71%
By having them present but not partaking	Yes	86%
By partaking in communion with the parent's discretion	Yes	25%
Other:		
7. Our congregation does not seek to include children in the celebration of communion	Yes	30%
Other:		

Appendix II

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Appendix III

The Authors

Rudy Baergen holds a PhD in New Testament. He is currently co-pastor of First Mennonite Church in Waterloo ON. He taught at seminary in Bolivia for five years through the Commission on Overseas Mission of the General Conference Mennonite Church.

Muriel Bechtel is pastor of Warden Woods Mennonite Church in Scarborough ON. She is a doctoral candidate in theology at the Toronto School of Theology.

Paul Bergen is pastor of First Mennonite Church in Edmonton AB. He has a M.Div. from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart IN.

Bill Block is a graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He recently retired from his position as Associate Executive Secretary of the Leadership Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. He spent several years in India with the Commission on Overseas Mission of the General Conference Mennonite Church.

Adolf Ens is a professor of history and theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg MB. Ens has a Ph.D. from the University of Ottawa and has studied theology at the former Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He has overseas experience in Indonesia and Uganda.

Irma Fast Dueck is an assistant professor in practical theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg MB. She is beginning doctoral studies at the Toronto School of Theology.

Gerald Gerbrandt is President of Canadian Mennonite Bible College. A graduate of the College, he holds a Ph.D. in New Testament studies from Union Theological Seminary.

Harry Huebner is a professor of philosophy and theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible School in Winnipeg MB. He holds a Ph.D. from St. Michaels in Toronto. Huebner served with Mennonite Central Committee in the West Bank and Israel in 1981–83.

C. Arnold Snyder has a PhD in 16th century Anabaptist history studies. He has lived and worked in Argentina and Nicaragua. Currently he is a professor of Anabaptist history and Director of the Peace and Conflict Studies program at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo ON.

Robert J. Suderman is Executive Secretary of the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. He has a Doctor of Theology in New Testament. He

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April Yamasaki is pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford BC. She is a graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Tom Yoder Neufeld has a PhD in New Testament from Harvard University. He has lived in Europe and in the Middle East. Currently he is a professor of Bible at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo ON. He also chairs the Religious Studies department at the University of Waterloo.