

Covenant Conference Teaching Session I

Objectives for the day:

- Not making decisions
- To identify why such a model is needed now. The need to clarify how we tend to our common life as a conference while honoring congregational discernment processes.
- To test the level of support for the covenant model with key congregational leaders.
- Prepare to equip our delegates to engage this model at Annual Meeting in June

We trust that you have all read the covenant document carefully – and in some cases you likely have formed opinions on your reading. I want to invite you to hold your opinions on the document as loosely as possible while we proceed through this day and see where you come out at the end.

We have tested this document with our board and committees and all the pastor clusters. After talking through the document with pastors we tested their level of support from 1-5

Results among 46 pastors who participated in the meetings:

5 = Love it, go full speed ahead with it: 16

4 = It isn't perfect but I support moving ahead: 21 (with 5 that is 80%)

3 = I have significant questions about it but can support the general direction: 8

2 = I don't like it, but if it has broad support and we go with it, I will support it: 0

1 = Put it back in the drawer and never let it see the light of day again: 1

So that is why we are here today.

The church in every place is facing a challenging season. For all of our faith statements, resolutions, position papers, bylaws, guidelines, we are having a hard time knowing how to tend to the center of our faith when we face disagreements.

A lot of what we are struggling with in the church today falls into the category that the church calls “polity.” Embedded in that are the questions of authority, lines of accountability, the role of congregation, area conference, and denomination.

Slide 3: What specifically do we mean by Polity? “The way we do things around here.” Long ago, in the Mennonite tradition it was referred to as “housekeeping,” the way we “keep house,” or, “keep our house in order.” In our history we have not been very clear about how we do that. That's true of any denomination where the authority is not located in a centralized figure. ***But***, when authority is located in a centralized figure you have another kind of messiness...for example, a very bloody Reformation and the creation of martyrs comes to mind...

So I want to start today providing some background observations on polity to set up the discussion of the document itself.

Slide 4: Evidence that the political conversation in our culture has shaped our churchly conversation.

- Animation – describing reality and labeling people in polar terms doesn't serve us well. Labeling tends to create a vacuum in the center where no one is allowed to say anything constructive.
- We don't use most of these labels to describe our own position, we use most of them *on* each other, to move each other into corners, leaving the impression that we are saying something substantial and constructive. In fact, we are leaving a huge whole in the middle that no one is allowed to fill – because we are afraid when someone starts to fill that hole, *we will find ourselves unexpectedly trapped in a relationship we didn't want* – that is part of our American psychosis.

Slide 5: Evidence that we use poles when we describe the church we want:

- MC/GC – we've overcome much of that in our conference, because we had to.
- But across the church you can hear the description of polity (how we do things around here) describes as MC or GC as though those are the poles
- I'd like to suggest a different view of things
- Classic polity models in the Christian Church
 - Episcopal/Presbyterian/Congregational – no church is purely one model
 - Add the nuance of papal/radical congregational/synod/conference forms of polity
 - Then MC/GC – The MC/GC differences in polity – though real - do not represent polar ends of the polity continuum. In fact, our polities suggest *a lot* of similarity. MC/GC churches are congregational with some regional/national accountability and identity structures.

Slide 6: Our struggles to clarify our polity is understandable and is about more than resolving an MC/GC barrier

- We live in a world that is becoming more complex
- We are also part of a church that is growing in diversity:
 - Globally
 - Racial/ethnic diversity
 - Educational level – MC USA is one of *the* most highly educated denominations in the world- but there is an interesting sociological paradox about that because we have historically never offered doctoral degrees at any of our institutions – we have been ambivalent about education
 - Wealth diversity
 - Professional diversity
 - This growing diversity is not bad, but the process of tending relationships is growing more complex
- As our social environment grows in complexity – and our internal make up becomes more diverse – we can make fewer assumptions; we have to spend time clarifying how we do things around here
- If this visual reflects our reality, it could be said that the work we are doing today is right on schedule
- So let's talk about where greater clarity is needed. I propose:
 - it's not in making the decisions about any given issue
 - it's not in choosing the right authority structure – I don't think it's broken

- it's not about imposing uniformity in how we express our faith
- But there are some gaps in how we do things around here

Slide 7: Our bylaws describe how we keep house

- We've done it in a way that reflects our Mennonite tradition
- Our bylaws reflect that the congregation is the basic unit of the church – but it is not all the church – we affirm with the creeds that we believe in a holy catholic (small c) church
- The national and area conferences are also an expression of the church. We are not always explicit in knowing what kind of expression these entities are.
- The presence of these regional and national entities implies our belief that we are a better reflection of the body of Christ when the life we have in the church is not confined to only the local expression of the church.
- But look how we have described what it means to be members of this regional body:
 - ***Subscribe*** to the Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective
 - Agree to follow the ***principles and guidelines*** set forth in the bylaws
 - We expect that we may not always be in agreement ***on all significant levels*** of faith and practice.
- That's a pretty loosey-goosey way to run an organization!
- It's also a recognition that this not an organization – it's an organ-ISM – *we are a living being!*
- Nevertheless, as an *organism* we have not addressed how we tend to our relationships as we are *subscribing* to the Confession of Faith and as we are following *principles and guidelines*, and what are the *significant* matters of faith and practice.
- That's why we are offering this covenant model – to describe the things we will do that will increase the health of our body and build trust in one another and the Holy Spirit as we seek God's will.

Slide 8: Organizations require contracts; *Organisms* require covenants.

- As we say in this document, as anxiety increases in our denominational and conference “organisms” we tend to shift on the continuum from covenant to contracts.
- Let's consider the differences between covenants and contracts (Page 8)
 - Note Rodney Clapp is the source, but this came to me summarized by Kent McDougall
 - I'm going to use some marriage analogies here – it's one of the few forms of covenant we have left in our society – it's also the biblical metaphor for God's covenant with God's people. (Look at each couplet on slide 8)
- Last one particularly
 - When Shana and I got married, we threw ourselves at each other with all hormonal passion of any 20 year olds – we let go of every handle – we had no idea what we would encounter after that day – we trusted it would be great – *and by the grace of God, it has been terrific!*
 - And if that's how covenants work themselves out, we probably wouldn't need to be here today. But the Bible knows better than that:
 - Look at the story of Hosea and Gomer as a metaphor for God and God's people
 - God is all-in – God has closed God's exits

- **16** “On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, ‘My Master.’ **17** For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. **18** I will *make for you* a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. **19** And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. **20** I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.”
- God remains faithful in covenant, hoping against hope that his people will keep coming back, returning to work at it again – God’s stays constant
- The purpose of the church (local, regional, national, and global) is to be this community of people who are joined together in the covenant established by God in the cross of Jesus so that we become a place where God’s Spirit dwells in the material world (Ephesians 2)
- Little in our documents describes the processes whereby we will tend to this covenantal way of being community in our regional expression of the church.
- **Slide 9:** That’s the gap we are trying to fill – what we are trying to put in the hole that can draw us out of the corners of mistrust and fear in order to live in fidelity with one another as the people of God.

Teaching Session II

Defining the Term “Practice.”

- Our bylaws talk about “faith and practice” – our theological term for that is “praxis”
- In the past two generations we have seen a rather significant shift in the way “Christian practices” are understood. We have seen a shift in focus from spiritual practices (those things that bring us “face-to-face” with Jesus) to ethical practice (the moral and ethical way we live out our faith in response to good and evil in the world).
- **Slide 11:** This shift in focus is understandable:
 - What this document is referring to are *spiritual practices*, in the classical Christian sense:
 - Spiritual practices are those things we do in to come face-to-face with Jesus.
 - The scriptures are consistent – our transformation is *the work of the Spirit* within us.
 - II Corinthians 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces (face-to-face with Jesus), seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”
 - The ways we offer ourselves to God for the purposes of transformation: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world,[c] but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

- Ruth Haley Barton says that spiritual transformation is a cause and effect relationship – Be transformed by the renewing of your minds (spiritual formation) *so that* you can discern what is the will of God – what is acceptable and pleasing (the ethical response)
- The closer we draw to Christ, the closer we are drawn to one another.
- And as we will see, the things that draw us closer to Christ are not only the things we do in our prayer closets.

Clarifying the distinction between *spiritual practices* and *ethical practice*.

- In the 1950s, HS Bender tried to summarize the Anabaptist Vision. George R. Brunk III, Steve Dintamin and others have noted that soon after WWII, Mennonites made a shift in Mennonite spirituality
 - With new levels of exposure and engagement in the affairs of the world and the church’s growing international mission during and following WWII Mennonite scholars, in their writings, began to emphasize the ethical practice of our faith
 - Ethical – meaning the right, moral, or good way to be, or the right, moral and good things to do
 - Reconciliation, peace and justice
 - This shift in attention is understandable given what the world was experiencing and the new exposure to the horrors of the world Mennonites were experiencing, particular in post-war reconstruction efforts.
 - That shift resulted in a declining attention to the *spiritual practices* out of which our ethical practice grows
- **Slide 12** In the missional church way of framing the issues we see a corrective for the way our ethical practice has been too often separated from our spiritual practices (those things that bring us face-to-face with Jesus). In the missional church model, “ethics” are now understood as “witness.” As we practice those things that bring us face-to-face with Jesus, we are transformed “by the renewing of our minds so that we can discern the good, acceptable and perfect will of God.” That leads to the ethical practice of our faith, which, in missional terms, is understand as “witness to the will or reign of God in the world.”
 - In the monastic Christian tradition a community’s spiritual practices are thought of as a “rule” that we keep.
 - The Rule of Benedict. (Remember that Michael Sattler, who penned our first confession was a Benedictine!) These spiritual practices are called a “rule of life.”
 - We may recoil when we hear the word “rule” but what we are seeing in the West today is a renewal of this idea among communities in a new monastic tradition where the first thing they are putting on paper is not their *bylaws* but their *rule of life* Their spiritual practices are at the heart of these “rules” because they will form the community for witness in a particular way. (Thirdway and the Mennonite Worker are two of our member congregations in the new monastic movement who have articulated a “rule” as their starting point. These “rules” are similar in practice but have resulted in very diverse forms of witness).

Now to the specifics of this Covenant

- The covenant begins with God’s first move toward us

- It is Trinitarian – we are trying to engage in the fullest understanding of the Godhead
- Grounded in the greatest commandments – unqualified love of and for God and one another – we throw ourselves toward Christ with abandon and in doing so we find ourselves drawn closer to each other
- We expect that as we do this, the Spirit will transform us – we can surrender our pretension to perfection - we are all works in progress.
- Our commitment to one another is not born of our ethical rightness – but because we are allowing Christ to live in us.
- Our commitment to one another in covenant can only happen insofar as we submit ourselves completely to life we share in Jesus.
- **We've named six *spiritual* practices. Where did these come from – why these?**
 - We have very clear reasons for each of these – and they have to do with listening to our congregations, mission partners, and our past, present, and future to discern what God has been doing among us.
 - We've articulated these six by listening to the expressed longings of our historic, by listening to our racial/ethnic congregations, listening to our new/developing congregations and listening to our partners in South America.
 - We've also correlated these learnings with the missional traits in the Purposeful Plan that will serve as signposts that we are going the right direction – so you see each of the six practices has PP and one or more numbers after it – this is cross-referencing the traits of the missional church described on in the second appendix on page nine.
 - The first one is the most obvious – it all begins with worship – worship is how we commune with God, with Jesus, how we are present to the Holy Spirit – the place we realize who we are and who God is – see footnote for the things this includes.
 - The second one comes from our increasing racial/ethnic diversity – praying, fasting and giving generously (tithing?). These are the “trifecta” of spiritual practices for our Hispanic community. And in their context these things are done to separate ourselves from the drag of the principalities and powers of this age, so we can fully participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
 - This comes with a little bit of impatience from our Hispanic brothers and sisters. Anglos often think of principalities and powers in ideological terms – that is “isms” sexism and patriarchy and materialism, etc.
 - Our Hispanic brothers and sisters aren't arguing that these isms aren't real – but the isms are sociological ways of describing “the powers” and they want you to know that they believe these are spiritual in nature.
 - And that's important because when we describe problems in sociological terms rather than spiritual terms, we quickly come up with sociological answers, and that doesn't have to bring you face-to-face with Jesus.
 - The third practice comes to us from what we know from research on Mennonite practices: few of us are engaged in serious Bible study.
 - This is the time to raise the standard not lower it.
 - The early church saw the role of teacher as one of the most important roles.
 - The issue of polity and leadership – We have a fully articulated polity for ministerial leadership, but what about a polity for qualified teachers in the church – sometimes we find the *willing* person rather than the *qualified* person

- The fourth practice – we do not only come face-to-face with Jesus in our holy huddles – we come to see Jesus as we accept and offer hospitality particularly among the poor, the hungry, the prisoner and the stranger. (Luke 10)
- Fifth – we will study the Bible with our neighbors and strangers
 - You may find this one odd – takes us back to Bible study again – is that redundant
 - This practice rises from what we have learned from our partnership in South America
 - It reminds us of something we’ve forgotten:
 - How did Wellman Mennonite, First Mennonite Lincoln, First Mennonite Iowa City, Pleasant View, Washington, Northside, a number of churches in SD that are no longer with us, Templo Alabanza, Casa de Oracion, El Balsamo, Torre Fuerte, Centro Cristiano, Des Moines, Fort Dodge (closed) all start? Through Bible Studies, Sunday Schools, Bible schools - Mennonite brothers and sisters went into these communities and began reading/teaching the Bible to neighbors and strangers.
 - This practice isn’t necessarily about how we invite people to church – it’s how we introduce people to Jesus.
 - Our sisters and brothers in Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela are reminding us of something we’ve forgotten, that Bible teaching/theological education is an important means of evangelism. In the North in the last 50 years, we have separated evangelism and discipleship and decided that Bible study is something we do after someone has become a Christian.
- Finally, we have the practice of reconciliation – reconciliation is the center of our work – we meet Jesus face-to-face when we see the walls of hostility come down in the power of his cross.
- **This part of the covenant is the central agenda of our common life – nurturing spiritual transformation that will make us able to discern our witness in the world**
 - *The “doing” of this covenant is how we will recognize in each other that we are brothers and sisters...period! Not whether we think the same way about every thing at all times.*
 - What follows has to do with those *exceptional instances* when we differ on a *significant* aspect in the expression of our faith and life.
 - There are five things proposed here to guide our commitment when dealing with exceptional expressions of our faith (we might say “new” expressions of our faith also).
 - The process begins by being able to trace where we’ve come from and to understand how what the church has said made sense for its time and context– so that we appreciate that the church in the past was as much the people of God as the church in the present. Can we name how the Spirit was leading the church in what the church *has* said.
 - We demonstrate our mutual submission by seeking counsel in designing our process of discernment. We hope covenanted congregations will self-select and enter this process voluntarily. The intent is not so that someone else controls the process, but because none of us sees everything that God sees. We safeguard against our blind spots when we get more wisdom on our processes. We have already been at work in this area and have a resource already to go to help guide this process – *Seeking God’s Will Together*.
 - Because expressing our faith (ethical practice) in the world is always a matter of witness, we will call one another to articulate different expressions of faith in terms of

how such an expression *bears witness* to God's intended purposes for the church and the world.

- When congregations begin to explore different (new) expressions of our faith, we ask them to do it with one other congregation (not from the opposite pole). In doing so, we recognize the risk of giving ourselves to one another and we are putting something at risk. (1-3 years, the time frame will depend on the geographic location of the congregation relative to other congregations and the nature of the matter in focus. We will also need to negotiate whether the study will require "whole congregation" participation or "representative" participation from each congregation. The point is to have a substantial process of biblical discernment – we're not sure how long that takes).
- That we (conference leaders) would provide some guidance to ensure that the process is led by someone who is qualified to do it.

Slide 13: We've been in conversation with MC USA national leaders as we've developed this model. We want to be accountable to the broader church as we think about how we frame our relationships within the area conference and with the national conference. (Show video clip of Ervin Stutzman and Terry Shue offering their observations on this model).

Implications of this exceptional aspect of the covenant model

- Commitment to these practices as a way of working at spiritual transformation will frame our Annual Meeting agenda (Equipping, testimonies, listening to best practices)
- We need to come to a place where we are willing to self-empty (Philippians 2:5-11) There is no surplus of self-emptying in the Mennonite Church today – the anxiety of our church is high and that anxiety expresses itself as a lack of yieldedness.
- **(Slide 14)** This model is not trying to undo anything that we have in place, nor become so burdensome we can't manage it – it's filling a hole that has been there for a long time, and we will be helped if we stop trying to avoid filling in that hole. Click – "the Spiritual Practices of a Covenanted People Seeking Transformation."
- **All covenants are made in trust – trusting in the power of God's Spirit to lead us to a good outcome. We will live into a covenantal model at the speed of trust.**
- Do I believe that if we do these practices faithfully we will never have another disagreement? I do not. But I do believe the scriptures: "I want to know Christ..." and as we draw close to Christ, "If you think differently about anything, that too God will make clear to you, only hold on to what you have already obtained" (Philippians 3:10-16). We need not mistrust each other when we disagree – it is an occasion to trust God more.

Slide 15: Questions for feedback.

1. What do you look forward to if we move forward with this model?
2. What changes do you need in order to embrace the covenant?
3. What are your fears if we move forward with this?