



Being God's Faithful Community

A Covenant of
Spiritual Practices

A Study Guide

by Timothy R. Detweiler

Central Plains Mennonite Conference
An area conference of Mennonite Church USA



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Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices,
A Study Guide.

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Written by: Timothy R. Detweiler

Designed by: Erin Ramer

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Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices

INTRODUCTION

It has been said that we are living in a season of “discontinuous change.” *Continuous* change develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be anticipated and managed. *Discontinuous* change is disruptive, unexpected, and creates situations that challenge our usual way of thinking. We need not be afraid of this kind of change. We should not be surprised that as our society becomes more complex and our church becomes more diverse, the need to clarify our commitments to one another increases. We do well to recognize it and ask ourselves, “In this season of discontinuous change, what do we need to do to maintain our identity, tend to our relationships, and *practice* the things that bring us face-to-face with Jesus *together*?”

This study guide invites congregations to explore the possibility of a new covenant intended to help us navigate the challenges to unity that the church in many places and traditions is facing. This covenant, “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference,” attempts to help us maintain our unity around something more than uniformity of beliefs. Common beliefs are important and our Confession of Faith remains our guiding document. Member congregations of Central Plains “subscribe” to our Confession of Faith, and while our bylaws predict that there will be time when not all congregations will “agree on every significant matter of faith,” we have not described how we will tend to our relationships when we disagree.

“Being God’s Faithful Community” is an attempt to address this gap in this time of discontinuous change. The covenant opens with a statement of commitment to God and one another: ***In response to God’s unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.*** This covenant calls our congregations to commit to six spiritual practices. These practices were identified by conference staff as we listened to our congregations, our history, and our partners in South America.

Even if we commit ourselves to this set of common practices, we will still find ourselves disagreeing about significant matters of faith from time to time. The covenant also outlines a five-step process of biblical discernment that takes our relationships with one another seriously.

Our hope is that this covenant model can help us be a faithful community of congregations through a common “rule of life” that will help us deepen our trust in the Holy Spirit’s power to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. Whether we agree or disagree, this covenant assumes that when we are grounded in the spiritual practices that bring us all face-to-face with Jesus, the Holy Spirit will be at work among us, “transforming us from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” (II Corinthians 3:18)

For now, the covenant is a study document for discussion; we invite our congregations to take time to participate in this study before we consider adopting it as a conference. Additional resources to guide those who are leading this study can be found on the following web-page: www.centralplainsmc.org/covenant-resources.

May God grant us wisdom and courage as we seek to be “God’s Faithful Community” in these changing and challenging times!

David Boshart
Executive Conference Minister



F Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices

Facilitator Orientation

This study guide is intended to help your congregation prayerfully consider the merits of the proposed covenant for Central Plains Mennonite Conference entitled, *Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices*. This covenant was introduced to the delegate body at the Annual Meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, on June 18-21, 2015. Congregations within Central Plains are being asked to study the covenant in preparation for further discernment at the Central Plains Annual Meeting in June 2016. This study guide is meant to be a practical guide to assist congregations in this discernment process.

This study guide is organized around four topics:

Session 1: What does it mean to be a covenant people?

Session 2: What is the role of the Holy Spirit in forming God's people?

Session 3: How do spiritual practices empower us to maintain the unity of the body?

Session 4: How do we trust the Holy Spirit to be at work as we face difficult issues?

Each session has the following structure:

- **Lesson Focus** statement
- **Preparation** pointing the teacher to helpful resources to be read before each lesson.
- **Teaching Points** highlighting important information on each lesson for the teacher. The teacher is free to share as much of this with the class as time allows.
- **Focus questions** for beginning the lesson (10 min.)
- **Biblical overview** of scripture passages related to the topic with discussion questions and points for the teacher to highlight. (25 min.)
- **Discussing the document** *Being God's Faithful Community*:

A Covenant of Spiritual Practices with discussion questions and points for the teacher to highlight. (20 min.)

- **Wrap-up** with questions (5 min.)

Each lesson is designed to be one hour in length. You may feel there is more material in each session than can be adequately processed in one hour. Congregations who want to give more time to each lesson may consider extending the block of time for each lesson to an hour and a half, or you may split each lesson into two sessions. The first session could be focused on the biblical material and the second session be focused on discussing the covenant document.

A **bibliography** of resources used can be found at the end of each lesson. It would be especially helpful for the facilitator to have access to these two books:

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Pursuing God's Will Together*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Bass, Dorothy C., ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Press, 1997.

You will find the Barton book essential for your preparation of the lessons. The Bass book gives extremely helpful insight into the role of spiritual practices in the Christian life.

The teaching videos by David Boshart will also be essential to understanding and teaching the covenant.

Covenant Teaching Session 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKM4vzay6P8>

Covenant Teaching Session 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MQcZ5poQpk>

Covenant Teaching Session 3

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bs_gVBhers

Covenant Teaching Session 4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ANwV6pGPfg

I wish you God's guidance and blessing as you use this study guide to discuss *Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices*.

Timothy R. Detweiler
Central Plains Mennonite Conference



1

Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices

Session One:

What does it mean to be a covenant people?

LESSON FOCUS:

To understand the meaning of covenant as used in the Bible and to reflect together on what it would mean for Central Plains Mennonite Conference to be a covenant people.

PREPARATION:

Prior to the lesson, the teacher is encouraged to do some background reading on the meaning of "covenant" as used in the Bible. Take a good Bible dictionary and do some reading on covenants. Some good resources include: The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible and Believers Church Bible Commentary on Genesis and Exodus provide good background information on Covenant in the essay section.

TEACHING POINTS:

The Biblical writers talk about our relationship with God and our relationship with each other by using the language of "covenant." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for covenant (berith) is used 284 times. While there are different forms of covenants and different formulas for making covenant in the Bible, the use of the word "covenant" is always about relationships. Covenant is an important way in which God's story is shaped and told in the Bible. Ruth Haley Barton says, "Making and keeping covenants is the way God does relationships." (p 155)

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible defines covenant as "A solemn promise made binding by an oath, which may be either a verbal formula or a symbolic action. Such an action or formula is recognized by both parties as the formal act which binds the actor to fulfill his promise." (p 714) Covenants define what we vow and promise to do for the sake of a relationship. "We put covenants in place when what is at stake is so important that we dare not leave the relationship up to

chance, subject to passing whims or confused by misunderstanding.” (Barton, p 154)

As we enter into these covenants in the church, we do so in response to the initiative of God in our lives for the sake of our important relationships. For example, we receive baptism as a sign of God’s grace and saving act in our life; in marriage, God joins two people together into one flesh; the call of ordination is accepted in response to God’s call and the community’s affirmation.

Covenants provide a structure for building relationships of trust, accountability and stability. Expressions of love are strengthened by the promises and commitments we make toward God, members of the church, our spouse and between pastor and congregation through the making of covenant.

Covenant forms the building block for telling God’s story throughout Scripture. The Bible tells the story of God as One who takes the initiative to be in relationship with us; a God who is faithful in keeping his promises; a God whose everlasting love always finds a way to draw us into relationship; a God who goes to great length to create covenant – a family – a Kingdom people.

In “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices,” covenant is understood to “help us maintain relationships with God and each other. Baptism, marriage, and ordination are common covenantal relationships that church members enter. This covenant proposes a way for members of Central Plains Mennonite Conference to give ourselves to God’s transforming work in our lives so we can know fullness of life in God’s reign even when we differ.”

This document goes on to say that “A biblical view of covenant understands covenant as a relational vision that originates with God and God’s hope for blessing and redeeming the world. Human actors in covenant making do not negotiate the terms of this relational vision. The covenant is ‘received.’ Human actors receive the covenant out of a heartfelt desire to honor the gift promised in the covenant. By lining up behaviors with God’s vision, recipients of the covenant make themselves available to participate in and bear witness to God’s hope for all people and all creation.”

TEACHING THE LESSON:

Focus Questions: (10 min.)

1. When you hear the word “covenant,” what comes to your mind? (Write down people’s responses on newsprint.)
2. Name examples of some covenant relationships you are involved with. (Again write down responses – people will likely say things like marriage, adoption of children, church membership, etc.)

A Biblical Overview of Covenant: (15 min.)

Depending on the size of the group, assign groups of 2-3 persons one of the following **Scripture Passages Highlighting Important Covenants in the Bible**:

Genesis 1:28 – 2:3 God’s covenant with Adam & Eve

Genesis 9: 8-17 God’s covenant with Noah

Genesis 15:1-21; 17:1-14 God’s covenant with Abram

Exodus 19:16 - 20:21; 24:1-7 God’s covenant at Mount Sinai – The Ten Commandments

Jeremiah 31:31-34 A New Covenant

2 Samuel 7:16 God’s covenant with David

Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20 Jesus – “This cup is the new covenant in my blood”

Hebrews 8:6-13 (See also Chapters 9 & 10) Jesus, the High Priest of a better covenant

Have each group read the scripture and discuss the following questions:

1. Who initiates the covenant and why?
2. Who are the parties named in this covenant?
3. What are the promises, oaths and vows spoken in this covenant?
4. Are there any blessings and curses mentioned in the covenant?

5. What human response does this covenant call for?
6. What is the sign given that helps the parties remember this covenant?
7. Describe the relationship this covenant establishes.

Reporting Back: Gather as a large group. (10 min.)

Have each group share key understandings from the scripture they read about the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping the church.

Make sure the following points get highlighted:

1. God is the initiator of these covenants – Our God is a covenant-making God.
2. God models unconditional commitment to bless and redeem the world through these covenants – Our God is a covenant-keeping God.
3. These covenants emphasize God’s gracious gift of relationship. God’s steadfast love is forever present.
4. God articulates the terms of the covenant. The people receive God’s covenant in response to God’s steadfast love and acts of deliverance. While some covenants are more explicit in spelling out the terms and responsibilities (the covenant made at Mt. Sinai), all of the covenants assume some human response. For example Genesis 9 calls for behavior that respects the gift of life and in Genesis 15 Abraham responded with faith and trust.
5. A sign is given so that the parties involved will remember the covenant.
6. Both the unconditional gift of God’s steadfast love and the terms that spell out the responsibility of the people are important. Eugene Roop says it well, “If the unconditional-gift emphasis of the Davidic-Abrahamic covenant disappears, covenant can dissolve into a legal contract dependent on the right behavior of the people for its future. Misbehavior looms as a final threat to the future of the relationship. But should the Sinaitic emphasis be lost, covenant can provide a false sense of security, allowing the covenant people to assume that God is for them regardless of what they do. Covenant initiated by God involves both gift and

responsibility.” (p 316) See Appendix 1 in “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices” for a chart depicting the contrast between Contractual and Covenantal Relationships.

7. Covenant shapes and forms the community of God’s people. Covenant establishes our relationship with God and with each other.

Discussing Covenant in “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices”:

The Covenant:

In response to God’s unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

For Discussion: (20 min.)

1. Given the relational function of covenant, both with God and with each other, how can this *covenant of common spiritual practices* strengthen our communal relationship within Central Plains Conference? Discuss the benefits of being in covenant with each other. (Give opportunity for responses.)
2. What are the challenges we face living in our society today that make keeping covenant with each other difficult? (Give opportunity for responses.)

Some points to highlight:

- a. Covenant helps form our identity as God’s community.
- b. Community is the place where we find belonging, purpose, accountability.
- c. Community gives us a place to receive and practice love, reconciliation, unity. Community is the place where we “do love,” where we “get relationships,” and where we “model reconciliation.” As we do so, we give witness to the world of the transforming work of Christ within us.
- d. As God’s people in community, we join in God’s mission for the world. Covenant shapes us to be God’s missional commu-

nity in our world.

e. **Individualism:** Individualism is a powerful influence in our society today. Individualism gives primary importance to the interests and identity of the individual apart from community. Covenant on the other hand, calls one to submit to the purposes of God in community. Discuss how our culture's value of individualism helps or hinders God's understanding of covenant.

f. **Our understanding of Church:** The New Testament uses images like "kingdom" (Colossians 1:13; Romans 14:17) and the "body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12ff, Romans 12:4ff) to describe the nature of the church. Images like "kingdom" and "body" emphasize a connection with all of God's people. No one individual, no one congregation, no one denomination make up the kingdom and body of Christ. The church is universal in scope.

The way we organize and talk about "church" in our day is around denominations, conferences, and congregations. Within these individual bodies, there are wide varieties of worship styles, theological emphases and practices. This gives rise to the temptation to view these individual bodies as being "complete" apart from the "whole". This perspective encourages discernment work that is fragmented and breeds a consumer mentality. Individual groupings do their own discernment work. Individual members shop around to find the congregation that meets their particular need or theological perspective. When an individual does not agree with others, or when there is a conflict in the congregation or denomination, the temptation is to shop around until one finds a group that meets their need.

Discuss these challenges in light of what it means to make a covenant with a local congregation to "give and receive counsel?"

Discuss these challenges in light of what it means for congregations in Central Plains Mennonite Conference to covenant together around key spiritual practices? How might individualism and the understanding of church today help or hinder our

ability to make covenant with each other in our conference?

Wrap-Up: (5 min.)

End the lesson by asking persons to share learning, ideas from this study. What will you take with you?

How does your experience reflect the learnings from this lesson?

In what ways could you imagine your church experience becoming more covenant-focused?

Bibliography

Roop, Eugene F. *Genesis*, Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987.

Barton, Ruth Haley. *Pursuing God's Will Together*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 1, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962.

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2

Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices

Session Two:

*What is the role of the Holy Spirit in forming
God's people?*

LESSON FOCUS:

The objective for this session is to help participants develop a deeper understanding of the role the Holy Spirit plays in forming us as God's people and shaping our life together as Christian community.

PREPARATION:

Prior to the lesson, the teacher is encouraged to read through the New Testament book of Acts, preferably in one setting (approx. 2.5 hours). Also read Article 3 in the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, 1995.

TEACHING POINTS:

Chalmer Faw writes that “the Holy Spirit embodies all the qualities and powers of the Father and the Son...the Holy Spirit is the active presence of the triune God in the here and now of Christian individuals and groups.” (p 316)

The Gospels introduce John the Baptist as one “filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth” (Luke 1:15). John the Baptist introduces Jesus as the One who will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). The Holy Spirit was present at Jesus’ conception and birth (Matthew 1:18, Luke 1:35); at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:22; Matthew 3:16-17; John 1:33-34); in Jesus’ life and ministry (Luke 4:1, 14, 18); and as Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick and performed many mighty works. The Gospel of John describes a close relationship between Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit (John 1:32-34; 14:15-27; 15:26-27; 16:1-16).

As Jesus prepared his disciples for his arrest, death and resurrection, Jesus promised to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit who will teach, lead and empower his disciples forever (John 14:15-27; 15:26-

27; 16:1-16). Luke ends his Gospel with Jesus giving his disciples a promise and instructions: “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

The book of Acts, as well as all of the New Testament, is the story of how the Holy Spirit led, taught, shaped and empowered the early church to be witnesses for Jesus “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Acts 2:1-13 tells the story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all believers on the Day of Pentecost. The New Testament tells the story of how the early church is led, taught, shaped and empowered by the Holy Spirit for giving witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world - his life, teaching, death and resurrection.

“Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices” highlights that “Our confession affirms that the Holy Spirit ‘dwells in each child of God,’ ‘enables our life in Christian community,’ ‘calls people to repentance, convicts them of sin, and leads into righteousness all those who open themselves to the working of the Spirit...The Spirit teaches us, reminds us of Jesus’ word, guides us into all truth, and empowers us to speak the word of God with boldness.’ In practice, however, many Mennonites are less oriented toward what the Spirit can do through them and more oriented toward living obediently on their own strength. Diligent, prayerful, biblical discernment is the primary means by which we open ourselves to the working of the Spirit. As we live in faithfulness, we trust the Spirit to work and therefore we do not need to control the outcome of discernment.”

TEACHING THE LESSON:

Focus Questions: (10 min.)

1. When you hear the words “Holy Spirit,” what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
2. What do you remember being taught about the Holy Spirit as a child? In recent years?

A Biblical Study on the Role of the Holy Spirit: (15 min.)

Depending on the size of the group, assign one of the following **Scripture Passages Highlighting the Role of the Holy Spirit in Shaping the Church** to groups of 2-3 persons.

John 14:15-27; I Corinthians 2:10-12 The Holy Spirit lives in you and will teach you all things

John 15:26-27; 16:1-16 The Holy Spirit testifies about Jesus and will guide you into all truth

Acts 1:6-8; 2:1-13 The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2: 16-21 The Holy Spirit is poured out on all people

I John 4: 1-3; I Corinthians 12:3 The Spirits need to be tested

Acts 11:1-18 The Holy Spirit is given even to the Gentiles

Acts 15: 1-35 The Holy Spirit leads the early church in facing difficult decisions

Galatians 5: 22-23 The fruits of the Holy Spirit

I Corinthians 2: 10-16 The Holy Spirit teaches us the “deep things of God, giving us the “mind of Christ

I Corinthians 12: 1-11ff; Ephesians 4:1-16 The Holy Spirit gives gifts for building up the body of Christ

Have each group read the scripture and discuss the following questions:

1. How do you define the role of the Holy Spirit in this passage? What does the Holy Spirit do in this passage?

2. To whom is the Holy Spirit given?
3. How was the Holy Spirit recognized in the early Church?
4. How was life in the early church shaped/guided by the Holy Spirit in this passage?
5. How does this passage shed light on how we can know that we are being led by the Holy Spirit today?

Reporting Back: Gather as a large group. (10 min.)

Have each group share key understandings from the scripture they read about the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping the church.

Make sure the following points get highlighted:

1. The Holy Spirit is God's presence and power living within us. The Holy Spirit is sent to us from God at Jesus' request (John 14:15ff).
2. The Holy Spirit understands the thoughts of God, who searches the "deep things of God" (I Corinthians 2:10-12) and is present to guide us into all truth (John 16:12). The Holy Spirit guides the church as we do our discernment work and as we make decisions.
3. The Holy Spirit teaches us the ways of Jesus, enabling the church to follow the example of Jesus in the world in which we live (John 14:26).
4. Jesus Christ is the standard for testing whether the spirit we are hearing is from God (I John 4:1-3).
5. The Holy Spirit shapes our life in Christian community:
 - Convicts us of sin and calls people to repentance (John 16:8-11)
 - Brings us into a relationship with God and Jesus (John 14:18-21)
 - Empowers the church to speak the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:23-31)
 - Enables us to love - even enemies, and follow Jesus' teaching (John 14:23-24)
 - Teaches us and reminds us of Jesus' teachings (John 14:26)

- Makes it possible to live into the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17)
- Produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)
- Equips God's people with gifts "so that the body of Christ may be built up." (Ephesians 4: 1-16)

Discussing Covenant in "Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices":

(Read the following quote from "A Covenant of Spiritual Practices")

"The Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective, 1995, affirms that the Holy Spirit 'dwells in each child of God,' 'enables our life in Christian community,' 'calls people to repentance, convicts them of sin, and leads into righteousness all those who open themselves to the working of the Spirit...The Spirit teaches us, reminds us of Jesus' word, guides us into all truth, and empowers us to speak the word of God with boldness.' In practice, however, many Mennonites are less oriented toward what the Spirit can do through them and more oriented toward living obediently on their own strength. Diligent, prayerful, biblical discernment is the primary means by which we open ourselves to the working of the Spirit. As we live in faithfulness, we trust the Spirit to work and therefore we do not need to control the outcome of discernment."

For Discussion: (20 min.)

1. Share a time in your life or in the life of the church when you experienced the Holy Spirit leading in your decision-making and discernment process. How did you know that you were being led by the Holy Spirit?
2. Share a time in your life or in the life of the church when the Holy Spirit felt distant or absent from your decision-making and discernment process. How did you know this and what hindered you from experiencing the Holy Spirit's leading?
3. What challenges do you face today that make trusting the Holy Spirit to work among us difficult? (Give opportunity for persons to share their insights.)

Some points to highlight:

- a. The statement is made in the document that “Mennonites are less oriented toward what the Spirit can do through them and more oriented toward living obediently on their own strength.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?
- b. Trusting the Holy Spirit to work in our midst requires a high level of trust among believers and congregations. What keeps you from trusting or believing that the Holy Spirit is at work in someone else’s life? Or in another congregation’s decision-making and discernment process?
- c. Letting go of strongly-held positions or desired outcomes is difficult. This requires what Ruth Haley Barton describes as a “movement toward indifference...I am indifferent to anything but God’s will.” She goes on to say of *indifference*, “There is a capacity to relinquish whatever might keep us from choosing God and love, and we have come to a place where we want God and God’s will more than anything – more than ego gratification, more than wanting to look good in the eyes of others, more than personal ownership, comfort or advantage” (p 63). This is the prayer of Mary when she was told by the angel that she would give birth to Jesus, “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). This is the prayer of Jesus in the garden just before his arrest, “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Letting go of one’s need to control the outcome of a decision or an event or a situation is essential for truly letting the Holy Spirit work in our life. Talk about what it means to pray this prayer of indifference as you make decisions as a congregation, as individuals, and as we do discernment within Central Plains Conference.

Wrap-Up: (5 min.)

End the lesson by asking persons to share what they learned from this study. What will you take with you?

How does your experience reflect the learnings from this lesson?

In what ways could you imagine your church becoming more Holy Spirit led?

Bibliography

Faw, Chalmer E.. *Acts*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 1995.

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3 Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices

*Session Three:
How do spiritual practices empower us to
maintain the unity of the body?*

LESSON FOCUS:

To understand the important role spiritual practices play for building Christian community and for creating space that allows Christ to be more fully formed within us.

PREPARATION:

Prior to the lesson, the teacher is encouraged to do some background reading on Christian Practices in chapter six (Practices for Opening to God Together) in Ruth Haley Barton's book *"Pursuing God's Will Together;"* Chapter 1 and 14 in *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass; listen to all four teaching videos by David Boshart on YouTube.

TEACHING POINTS:

As the title suggests, "Being God's Faithful Community" is a covenant built around spiritual practices. Prayer, fasting, meditation, hospitality, Sabbath keeping, and worship are a few examples of spiritual practices that have shaped and formed the way of life for the community of faith from Biblical times to the present. One of the qualities of spiritual practices is that they endure over time and across cultures. In a real way, spiritual practices help us understand our continuity with God's people as formed in the Old Testament and with the Christian tradition from the time of Christ. Spiritual practices help us treasure our connection with the past and to embrace the future with hope. They help us understand that we are members of a living tradition. Through spiritual practices we make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit who enables us to bear faithful witness to the way of Jesus in the world.

Our culture is experiencing significant, ongoing change. Our lifestyle is fast-paced. We are constantly learning to manage new and changing technology. Public opinions on deeply held values change at a rapid pace. Change touches our lives at every level: at home, in the church,

in the workplace, in our communities and in our relationships. These changes sometimes push and pull us in directions we never wanted to go. Dorothy Bass observes that these changing times set many people on a spiritual journey in search of solid ground. How do we know what is of value? What is the right path to follow? Where do we go for information given the many places available at our fingertips for seeking knowledge, wisdom and information on any particular topic? Bass writes that when we lack shared beliefs, “we conclude that our private preferences are the closest we can come to the truth of matters. When this happens, the solo quest only mimics the disconnectedness that gave it birth” (p 4).

In the midst of these changing times and as we live under the power of individualistic influences, we must stop and ask: How will we pray? How will we listen to God and to each other? How will we stay faithful to God’s transforming work in our lives and in our community of faith? How will we manage our anxiety so that we can bring a steady and alert presence to the decisions we face today? How can we stay open to Christ’s presence and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our living and in our decision-making? What shape will our witness to the Kingdom of God take?

We will find our way for living the Christian life today by tending to the spiritual practices that have led and guided the faith community throughout the centuries. These spiritual practices are important for forming and shaping us into the likeness of Jesus.

What are spiritual practices?

- Dorothy Bass writes “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.” (p 5)
- “Christian practices are not activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy and presence of God may be made known to us. They are places where the power of God is experienced. In the end, these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practice of God.” (Craig Dykstra)
- Spiritual practices are important for creating a “rule of life.” Ruth Haley Barton writes, “This is simply a regular pattern of

attitudes, behaviors and practices that – as we submit to them over time – create space and opportunity for Christ to be more fully formed in us...These practices...provide ways of surrendering our negative patterns and sinful behaviors so that we can be shaped by new ones as we do life together. They also help us open ourselves more intentionally to the presence and activity of God in our lives”. The overarching purposes of spiritual practices are to help communities of faith “to be responsive to the transforming presence of Christ so that we can discern and do the will of God.” (p 113)

This study is meant to show that spiritual practices *matter* for the life and witness of the Christian community.

- Spiritual practices help form and shape a way of life for individuals, congregations and the broader community of faith into the likeness of Jesus. Spiritual practices help to orient our life together around the transforming work of Christ so that we can discern God’s will together. We believe this is important for forming and shaping our life together in the Christian community.
- The Christian life, as described in the Bible, is to be lived out in community. God calls us into a “peoplehood,” the “body of Christ,” and into a community of faith. Spiritual practices are important because they point us beyond the individualism of our day so that our “thinking and living take place in relation to God and also to one another, to others around the world and across the centuries, and to a vast communion of saints.” (Dykstra)
- Spiritual practices endure over time and across cultures. They help us understand our connection with the Christian tradition. Spiritual practices help us treasure our continuity with the past, while also helping us embrace the future with hope. We are members of a living tradition.
- Spiritual practices help us attend to the concrete and down-to-earth quality of the Christian life. They bring together our “doing” and our “thinking.”
- Spiritual practices help us think about who we are as children of God. Christian practices help us reflect theologically about who we are and what we really need.
- Spiritual practices are to be understood, not as tasks, but as gifts. They are gifts that cultivate openness and responsiveness to

God, to the presence of Christ, to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to others in community and to the needs of our world.

- Dorothy Bass writes, “Every spiritual practice requires prayer” and “a dependence on a living encounter with the Bible. Spiritual practices are important for shaping our prayer life and for helping us interpret the Bible for living in our day.” (p 202)

In “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices” we make this covenant together: ***In response to God’s unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.*** Our spiritual practices bring us into the presence of God, trusting the Spirit to transform us into the likeness of Christ.

TEACHING THE LESSON:

Focus Questions: (10 min.)

1. When you hear the words “spiritual practice,” what is the first thing that comes to your mind?
2. How do you define “spiritual practices?”
3. What are some “spiritual practices” that give shape to your life? Why are these important?

A Biblical Study on “Spiritual Practices” (15 min.)

Depending on the size of the group, assign one of the following **Scripture passages highlighting spiritual practices in the Bible** to groups of 2-3 persons.

Acts 2:42-47 Spiritual Practices that shaped the life of the early church

Mark 1:35-39 Prayer shaped the life and ministry of Jesus and the disciples

Psalms 100 Worship shapes and sustains the faith community

Psalms 119:9-16 Meditating on God’s Word guides the path of the faith community

Acts 13:1-3 Prayer and fasting shaped the church at Antioch for mission

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 Generous giving shaped the early church for care-giving

Luke 24:13-35 Hospitality created space for meeting Jesus

Romans 12:9-21 Peacemaking shaped the community’s practice for showing love

Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15 Sabbath-Keeping shaped the faith community for honoring God as our Creator, Liberator and Care Giver

Have each group read the scripture and discuss the following questions:

1. Which spiritual practice is mentioned in this passage?
2. How did this spiritual practice shape life in the faith community?
3. How did this spiritual practice open up the faith community to God's presence and for being formed into the likeness of Christ?
4. How did this spiritual practice help the faith community discern God's direction?
5. How did this spiritual practice lead the faith community to participate in the purposes of God for the world?

Reporting Back: Gather as a large group. (10 min.)

Have each group share key understandings from the scripture they read about the role spiritual practices played in shaping the life and mission of the faith community.

Make sure the following points get highlighted:

1. Spiritual practices form and shape life in the faith community.
2. Spiritual practices orient our life together around the transforming work of Christ so that we can discern God's will together.
3. Spiritual practices point us beyond the individualism of our day. They are gifts that cultivate openness and responsiveness to God, to the presence of Christ, to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and to others in community.
4. Spiritual practices remind us that we are part of a "living tradition" – we have continuity with the faith community that has survived throughout the centuries.
5. Spiritual practices bring our "doing" and "thinking" together.
6. Spiritual practices help us reflect on who we are as God's people and how we bear witness to the purposes of God in the world.

Discussing the Spiritual Practices that support “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices”:

These are the common covenantal practices through which we seek transformation toward Christlikeness and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

1. We will worship God as the central act of our common life whenever the church is gathered.
2. We will practice prayer, fasting and generous giving to separate ourselves from the influences of the principalities and powers of this age and to make us available to fully participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
3. We will prayerfully study the Bible together weekly in our congregations and whenever the conference gathers, guided by qualified teachers for the purpose of increasing our competence in reading, interpreting, and applying the scriptures in an Anabaptist perspective to our everyday lives and to the critical issues of faith we face in the world.
4. We will accept and offer hospitality, believing it creates the context for God’s kingdom to appear in our midst particularly as we minister to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner and the stranger.
5. We will study the Bible with neighbors and strangers, inviting them to become disciples of Jesus.
6. We will practice peacemaking by extending loving-kindness and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters as well as to our neighbors and enemies.

For Discussion: (20 min.)

The six spiritual practices listed in “Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices” are not meant to be a complete list of spiritual practices. There are other spiritual practices that give form and shape to individuals and congregations in our conference. These six were chosen with the belief that they can help cultivate openness and responsiveness to God, give witness to the transforming presence of Christ at work in our life, open us up to the leading of the Holy Spirit, help us listen to each other, and empower us to bear witness to the purposes of God in the world.

1. In what ways can these spiritual practices offer hope for forming and shaping our life together as a conference?

2. Which of these spiritual practices already give form and shape to your congregational life? Which ones are lacking?
3. Which of these spiritual practices do you find to be most challenging? Why? How might these more difficult spiritual practices spur us on in our faith?
4. How open are you to covenant together with other congregations in our conference around these spiritual practices? If this idea of covenant around spiritual practices gives you pause, what is your greatest fear? What is the road block that holds you back from making covenant with conference congregations around spiritual practices?
5. Discuss how these spiritual practices can open Central Plains Conference up more fully to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wrap-Up: (5 min.)

End the lesson by asking persons to share learnings and ideas from this study. What will you take with you?

How does your experience reflect the learnings from this lesson about “spiritual practices”?

In what ways could you imagine your church experience becoming more covenant-focused around spiritual practices?

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4

Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices

Session Four:

How do we trust the Holy Spirit to be at work as we face difficult issues?

LESSON FOCUS:

*To understand the importance of **trusting** and **discerning** the work of the Holy Spirit as we face difficult issues..*

PREPARATION:

Resources for preparing the teacher for this lesson: The book of Acts recounts the first 30 years of the church and provides an excellent study for how the early believers trusted the Holy Spirit to lead and empower their ministry, guide them as they faced difficult issues, and direct them as the church was formed. Chapter 3 of Ruth Haley Barton's book, *Pursuing God's Will Together* is also a helpful resource for this lesson.

TEACHING POINTS:

In session three, the point was made that change touches our lives at every level: at home, in the church, in the workplace, in our communities and in our relationships. These changes sometimes push and pull us in directions we never wanted to go. While change is inevitable, it can also produce fear and anxiety. The good news is that because we have been given the Holy Spirit, we need not be afraid of change. We can put our trust in Jesus when he promised that "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:26, 27) We can trust in the goodness of God's Spirit to do exactly what Jesus promised, that the Spirit of truth will "guide us into all truth." (John 16:13)

Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit raises important questions: How do we come to trust in the Holy Spirit's leading as we face dif-

difficult issues? How can we trust in the Holy Spirit's leading when the church seems so divided on issues? Is it possible for the Holy Spirit to be leading Christians down different paths on the same issue? These questions highlight the need for the church to be a discerning people. In fact, the Bible calls us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." (1 John 4:1)

Ruth Haley Barton says that discernment is not only about making decisions; it is first of all a habit. This habit is a way of seeing that permeates our whole life. Discernment is a habit that enables us to be attentive to God. We come to know the tone, quality and content of God's voice so that we can sense God's heart and purpose at any given time. Barton writes, "Cultivating the habit of discernment means we are always seeking the movement of God's Spirit so we can abandon ourselves to it." (p 57)

Barton says that seeking the movement of God's Spirit is like floating down a river. (p 57) Trusting the Holy Spirit to help us discern the movement of God feels much like when our family went river rafting on the Payette River in Idaho. There were times when we floated down the river relaxed, engaged in good conversation and enjoying the beautiful scenery as the gentle current carried us with the movement of the river. There were other times when the current and rapids became swift and unpredictable, requiring us to pay close attention to technique and team work so that we could continue to float with the movement of the river and not be thrown overboard. Trusting the Holy Spirit to lead feels much like this. Just as we could not set the direction or speed of the current, neither can we set the direction the Spirit is leading us. There were other people on the river with us, but we were not always at the same place on the river. Some were in the rapids while others were gently floating down the river. Yet we were all moving in the direction of the river current. We must trust the Spirit of God to carry us along in the direction God has for us. We may not all be at the same place but we know that the Spirit will always lead us in the way of Jesus.

This highlights the importance of paying special attention to good discernment which involves testing the spirits to see whether they are from God. How do we know whether the movement of the Spirit is moving us in the direction of God's will? The Bible gives specific guidelines and signs for knowing and testing the work of the Holy Spirit.

- The Holy Spirit affirms that Jesus has been sent from God (I John 4:2) and that Jesus is Lord (I Corinthians 12:3).
- The Holy Spirit leads us in the way of Jesus' teachings (John 14:26).
- The Holy Spirit will produce fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives. (Galatians 5:22)
- The Holy Spirit leads toward greater unity. (Ephesians 4:3,13; John 17)
- The Holy Spirit leads us into God's mission for the world. (Matthew 28:18-20; II Corinthians 5:19)

Trusting and **discerning** the work of the Holy Spirit as we face difficult issues also requires careful attention to good discernment processes.

- It should go without saying that the first step in **trusting** and **discerning** the work of the Holy Spirit is to welcome and acknowledge the Holy Spirit in our lives. Like the early Christians, we must develop a trust and reliance upon the Holy Spirit for creating a way of life within us that reflects a Christ-centered faith, a movement into the ways of God, a life that reflects the fruits of the Spirit, and empowerment for mission.
- The more we tend to spiritual practices the better we will be at knowing the tone, quality and content of God's voice. The Holy Spirit often revealed God's direction to persons when they were in prayer – Jesus (Mark 1:35-38); Peter (Acts 10:9ff); and Paul (16:25) to name a few. We need to be people of prayer as we discern the work of the Holy Spirit among us. The more we live into the spiritual practices, the better we will be at recognizing the Holy Spirit's work in our midst. Consistent spiritual practices free us of the need to control the outcome of decision-making and trust the Holy Spirit to move us toward God's will.
- Barton identifies eight important categories with good clarifying questions that are helpful in discerning the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. See p 68-69.

TEACHING THE LESSON:

Focus Questions: (10 min.)

1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about trusting and discerning the work of the Holy Spirit as we face difficult issues?
2. What are your hopes and fears?

A Biblical Overview (15 min.)

Depending on the size of the group, assign groups of 2-3 persons one of the following **scripture passages highlighting ways in which the Holy Spirit guided the early church:**

John 14:15-27 The Spirit will lead us in the ways of Jesus

Acts 4:1-31 The Holy Spirit empowered the early believers to speak the word of God boldly

Acts 10 The Holy Spirit led Peter to Cornelius' house

Acts 1:7-8; 13:1-3 The Holy Spirit led the early church in mission

Acts 15 The Holy Spirit led the apostles as they faced a difficult issue at the Jerusalem Council

Galatians 5:13-26 Guidelines for "walking in the Spirit"

I John 4:1-6; I Corinthians 12:3 The Holy Spirit gives testimony to Jesus

Romans 15:1-13 God gives us the spirit of unity and hope

Ephesians 4:1-16 The Holy Spirit brings unity and helps build up the body of Christ

Have each group read the scripture and discuss the following questions:

1. How did the Holy Spirit lead and empower persons in this passage?
2. What insights do you receive from this passage for **trusting** and **discerning** the work of the Holy Spirit as we face difficult issues?

Reporting Back: Gather as a large group. (10 min.)

Have each group share key understandings from the scripture they read about how persons came to trust and/or discern the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Make sure the following points get highlighted:

1. We can know when we are being led by the Spirit of God because the Holy Spirit affirms Jesus as the One sent from God (I John 4:2). The Spirit affirms Jesus as Lord (I Corinthians 12:3).
2. The Holy Spirit will always lead us in the way of Jesus' teachings (John 14:26).
3. The Holy Spirit will convey the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22) We are all called to walk in step with the Spirit.
4. The Holy Spirit leads toward greater unity for building up the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:3,13; John 17)
5. The Holy Spirit leads us into God's mission for the world. (Acts 1:8; 13:2)
6. We are not left alone as we face difficult situations. We can trust the Holy Spirit to be present within our decision making and in our ministry. (John 14:18; Acts 10 & 15)

Discuss how we trust and discern the work of the Holy Spirit for facing difficult issues in “*Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices*”: (Read the following section from “A Covenant of Spiritual Practices”)

At our 2012 regional meetings, it was very clear that most of our congregations express love for one another and trust that other congregations are sincere in their desire to follow Jesus. Because we love and trust each other, we covenant to submit to clear and reliable pathways for communal biblical discernment when considering beliefs and practices that differ from the broader church. Speaking clearly and listening well, we agree to the following pathways for discernment. (PP Trait 12)

When a congregation is considering beliefs or practices that differ from the beliefs and practices outlined in our conference by-laws, Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective (1995), Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love, and A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership (the polity manual), the congregation will:

1. Begin by articulating how the beliefs and practices we hold in common (named above) bear witness to God’s intended purposes for the church and the world. (PP Trait 5, 7)
2. Accept guidance from the Conference Board in designing a trustworthy process of discernment. Seeking God’s Will Together will provide the basis for acceptable discernment. (PP Trait 5, 8)
3. Articulate the new belief or practice to brothers and sisters in the conference in terms of how it bears witness to God’s intended purposes for the church and the world. (PP Trait 5, 11) (In other words, we do not choose positions based on our preferences and then develop the theology that supports them. Our faith claims are expressed and tested in terms of how they are aligned with God’s purposes for the church and the world.)
4. Enter into a 1-3 year period of prayerful communal biblical discernment with a peer congregation that embraces the conference’s articulated beliefs and practices. The standards for this substantive 1-3 year Bible study are yet to be determined. It would not be expected, or likely helpful, that such pairings would be with congregations that represent polar positions.

5. Be led in their study by a teacher offered by the Conference Board. Teachers will be chosen based on their ability to lead an honest inquiry, not for their ability to lead toward a predetermined outcome. (PP Trait 7, 8,)

For Discussion: (20 min.)

1. This process requires a great deal of trust in the Holy Spirit's presence to lead and guide us when we face difficult situations.

- What are the signs that help you know when the Holy Spirit is leading in your life? In your congregation's life? In our conference's life?
- What gives you hope in this process?
- What hinders your ability to do this?

2. This process requires trust in one another. The *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, 1995, affirms that "The Spirit dwells in each child of God, bringing us into relationship with God." (p17, 18)

- Can you trust the Holy Spirit to be at work in the life of your sister or brother in the Lord? In another congregation's life? Why or why not?
- Are you willing to engage in Bible study with another congregation who is considering a different position than yours on a given situation? Why or why not?

3. This process calls for letting go of our need to control the outcome so that we can seek the movement of God's Spirit and abandon ourselves to it. This requires what Barton calls "the movement toward indifference." (p 63) This means we are indifferent to anything but God's will. This is the prayer of Jesus who prayed, "Not my will but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

- What do you need to set aside so that you can be open to what God wants?
- What makes the prayer of indifference difficult for you?
- What gives you hope and promise as you pray this prayer of indifference?

Wrap-Up: (5 min.)

End the lesson by asking persons to share what they gained from this study.

What will you take with you?

How does your experience reflect the learnings from this lesson?

When we face difficult issues, can you trust the Holy Spirit to be at work in the lives of persons who differ with you?

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Introduction to a Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Maintaining our unity through belief and practice

The Kanagy survey of credentialed leaders tells us that a majority of Central Plains pastors value unity where we disagree.¹ This is something we should recognize and celebrate. However, our value of unity doesn't mean we always know how to 'maintain this unity in the bond of peace.' (Ephesians 4:3)

Currently, our conference and denominational by-laws refer to beliefs we hold in common. Commonly held beliefs are essential for maintaining communal identity. Our *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995), or any succeeding confession, will continue to guide the faith and life of our conference.

The Central Plains Mennonite Conference bylaws say that any congregation may become a member of the conference if the congregation:

- Is located in the Geographical Area;
- Subscribes to the Biblical faith as expressed in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) or any succeeding *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*;
- Agrees to follow the principles and guidelines set forth in these Bylaws;
- Properly completes an application in the form prescribed by the Conference Board; and
- Is approved for membership in the Conference by a two-thirds majority vote of the Delegate Body

Two of these requirements are cast in terms of commitments, but we do not explain to what extent these commitments are mandatory. We don't define what we mean by "subscribing" to a confession, nor do we specify how a congregation "follows the principles and guidelines." In other words, our bylaws do not address *how* and *to what extent* the beliefs we "hold" are *binding* or *how we handle situations when we disagree* on these things.

Presumably, a congregation that wants to be Mennonite and that meets the criteria for membership in a Mennonite conference is doing so because it assents to commonly held Mennonite beliefs. It is rea-

sonable for the conference to expect that member congregations actually manifest these beliefs in their common life. Even so, our bylaws anticipate times when congregations “may not always be in agreement on all significant levels of faith and practice.”

Yet, experience has shown that it is difficult on a practical level to hold one another accountable for a difference in beliefs. On a relational level, divisions occur when we expect everyone to agree on everything we say we believe.

There is a close relationship between belief and spiritual practice. That is, our beliefs tell us what we value and they orient us toward how we practice our faith. As we live out our faith by following Jesus’ commandments, those experiences shape our beliefs. In all of this, the Holy Spirit is the counselor who reminds us of everything Jesus taught us and who enables us to obey (John 14:15-26). We can trust that as our sisters and brothers live out the spiritual practices outlined in this covenant, the Holy Spirit will shape their beliefs.

Since belief and spiritual practice are so closely related, this document proposes that we agree to be accountable to one another not only for holding common beliefs, but also for implementing a set of common spiritual practices. Commonly held beliefs are essential for maintaining communal identity. Our *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995), or any succeeding confession, will continue to guide the faith and life of our conference.

Commonly held practices may be even more important for maintaining communal identity. First, it is difficult to see someone’s beliefs, but it is not difficult to observe their practices. Second, spiritual practices shape our beliefs. As we obey Jesus, we come to know Jesus, and this knowing becomes belief. Third, spiritual practices shared by the community powerfully shape the identity of the community.

This document also proposes that when congregations come to differ on a commonly held belief, they will implement a specific set of discernment practices that are described below.

Biblical discernment and the guidance Holy Spirit

As Mennonites, we aspire to be a biblical people.² When we face challenging matters of faith and life, our churches turn to the Bible for help and guidance. However, the most recent Mennonite Church USA Member Profile showed that fewer than 17% of Mennonite Church USA participates in weekly small groups for discussion, Bible study or prayer outside of Sunday School.³ This would suggest that while we turn to the Bible in the face of challenging matters of faith and life, the biblical story may not be shaping our daily lives.

Our Confession affirms that the Holy Spirit “dwells in each child of God,” “enables our life in Christian community;” “calls people to repentance, convicts them of sin, and leads into righteousness all those who open themselves to the working of the Spirit...The Spirit teaches us, reminds us of Jesus’ word, guides us into all truth, and empowers us to speak the word of God with boldness.”⁴ In practice, however, many Mennonites are less oriented toward what the Spirit can do through them and more oriented toward living obediently on their own strength. Diligent, prayerful, biblical discernment is the primary means by which we open ourselves to the Spirit leading us toward God’s will for us. As we live in faithfulness, we trust the Spirit to work and therefore we do not need to control the outcome of discernment.

A covenant of common spiritual practices

Covenants help us maintain relationships with God and each other. Baptism, marriage, and ordination are common covenantal relationships that church members enter. This covenant proposes a way for members of Central Plains Mennonite Conference to give ourselves to God’s transforming work in our lives so we can know fullness of life in God’s reign even when we differ.

A biblical view of covenant understands covenant as a relational vision that originates with God and God’s hope for blessing and redeeming the world. Human actors in covenant making do not negotiate the terms of this ideal vision. The covenant is “received.”⁵ Human actors receive the covenant out of a heartfelt desire to honor the gift promised in the covenant. By lining up behaviors with God’s vision, recipients of the covenant make themselves available to participate in and bear witness to God’s hope for all people and all creation.

Our Purposeful Plan helps us maintain our common life as a church and helps us live out our calling to be God’s people. The Purposeful Plan envisions “a culture of high expectations for people who call themselves members of the church.”⁶ It also describes twelve traits of the missional church.⁷ These traits are described as “signposts” that indicate we are moving in the right direction. These twelve traits are all expressed in terms of behaviors or spiritual practices. If these traits are indeed the signposts that tell us we are moving in the right direction, related spiritual practices offer a common path for those who want to participate in and bear witness to God’s transforming work in the world. A covenant that calls us to these practices may enable us to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

¹ Kanagy, *2014 Survey of Credentialed Leaders in Mennonite Church USA*, table 24.

² What it means to be a biblical people may vary but as Anabaptists, we hold to a Jesus-centered way of understanding the Bible.

³ Kanagy, MC Frequencies Report, 2006.

⁴ *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, Article 3.

⁵ Genesis 9:8-17; 15:1-21; Exodus 6:2-13; Exodus 19:1-25; Exodus 24:1-8, esp. v. 7; Deuteronomy 4:9-14; Joshua 24; Jeremiah 31:31-37; Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 21:14-24; Acts 3:17-26; Hebrews 7:11-28

⁶ *Our Purposeful Plan* (2014), p. 6. See appendix 2 for the list of missional traits.

⁷ The original source edited by Lois Barrett, *Treasure in Clay Jars*, lists these as “indicators” of a missional church.

Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference

The Covenant

In response to God's unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. ⁸

The Spiritual Practices

These are the common covenantal practices through which we seek transformation toward Christlikeness and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

1. We will worship God⁹ as the central act of our common life whenever the church is gathered. (PP Trait 10)
2. We will practice prayer, fasting and generous giving to separate ourselves from the influence of the principalities and powers of this age and to make us available to fully participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. (PP Trait 2, 4, 5, 6)
3. We will prayerfully study the Bible together weekly in our congregations and whenever the conference gathers, guided by qualified teachers ¹⁰ for the purpose of increasing our competence in reading, interpreting, and applying the scriptures in an Anabaptist perspective to our everyday lives and to the critical issues of faith we face in the world. ¹¹ (PP Trait 1, 2, 3)
4. We will accept and offer hospitality, ¹² believing it creates the context for God's kingdom to appear in our midst, particularly as we minister to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner and the stranger. (PP Trait 7, 9, 12)
5. We will study the Bible with neighbors and strangers, inviting them to become disciples of Jesus. (PP Trait 7, 9)¹³
6. We will practice peacemaking by extending loving-kindness and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters as well as to our neighbors and enemies. (PP Trait 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).

These spiritual practices will help to form our Annual Meeting agenda. Our Annual Meeting will become a time of equipping congregations to do these practices, and a space where we share testimonies of how we are being “transformed into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit” through these spiritual practices.

A Process of Discernment for Differing Beliefs and Practices

At our 2012 regional meetings, it was very clear that most of our congregations express love for one another and trust that other congregations are sincere in their desire to follow Jesus. Because we love and trust each other, we covenant to submit to clear and reliable pathways for communal biblical discernment when considering beliefs and practices that differ from the broader church. Speaking clearly and listening well, we agree to the following pathways for discernment. (PP Trait 12)

When a congregation is considering beliefs or practices that differ from the beliefs and practices outlined in our conference by-laws, *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995), *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*, and *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership* (the polity manual), the congregation will:

1. Begin by articulating how the beliefs and practices we hold in common (named above) bear witness to God’s intended purposes for the church and the world. (PP Trait 5, 7)
2. Accept guidance from the Conference Board in designing a trustworthy process of discernment. *Seeking God’s Will Together* will be used to prepare and equip the congregation to enter this process. This process will assume the interpretative commitments outlined in the modified Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Appendix 3. (PP Trait 5, 8)
3. Articulate the new belief or practice to brothers and sisters in the conference in terms of how it bears witness to God’s intended purposes for the church and the world. (PP Trait 5, 11) (In other words, we do not choose positions based on our preferences and then develop the theology that supports them. Our faith claims are expressed and tested in terms of how they are aligned with God’s purposes for the church and the world.)
4. Enter into a thorough and substantive process of biblical discernment with a peer congregation that embraces the con-

ference's articulated beliefs and practices. This process will be determined by the conference board in consultation with the two congregations and teacher. It would not be expected, or likely helpful, that such pairings would be with congregations that represent polar positions.

5. Be led in their study by a qualified teacher offered by the conference board in consultation with participating congregations. *Teachers will be chosen based on their ability to lead an honest inquiry, not for their ability to lead toward a predetermined outcome.* (PP Trait 7, 8,)

Some Implications of Adopting this Covenant

These practices provide the basis for a new covenant for Central Plains Mennonite Conference that all members would embrace to fulfill our missional calling. The covenant articulates the basic understandings for how all in the church will *practice* our common life in support of our common vision as described in our formational documents. Deepening our experiences of these practices then frames our agenda when we gather as a conference.

This covenant does require a new “self-emptying” (*kenosis*). This self-emptying reflects the self-emptying of Jesus in obedience (Philippians 2:5-11). Congregations will have to surrender the claim to control the decisions of other congregations. Instead, the measure of faithfulness to the covenant will be seen in the integrity with which the church enacts these spiritual *practices*.

This covenant is aligned with our conference bylaws, our Central Plains strategic plan and *Our Purposeful Plan* of Mennonite Church USA. It fills in the gap that currently exists in our stated understanding of membership by describing *how* congregations and the conference will work together in response to differences of belief. It lays out practical steps for holding congregations together in healthy accountability. Pastors are accountable to the Pastoral Leadership Committee for the commitments they make to the church at their credentialing, including the promise to “respect and be guided by the beliefs and practices of the Mennonite church.”¹⁴

The basis for membership remains the same, as stated in the by-laws. What changes is that we expect our spiritual *practices*, not only our

beliefs, to be the basis for maintaining our unity. In addition to holding one another accountable for adhering to shared beliefs, we will also hold one another accountable for adhering to shared spiritual practices. By increasing our openness to the Holy Spirit through these practices, we hope to vitalize individual congregations and enhance our fellowship as a community of congregations. By doing so, we can allow for *some* difference in beliefs, trusting that the Holy Spirit will be at work in those with whom we differ because we are all being transformed into the likeness of Christ through our spiritual practices. We agree that when a congregation's beliefs begin to differ from our commonly held positions, the congregation will turn to the practice of communal biblical discernment. In doing so, we submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through an accountable discernment process.

By embracing this covenant, we agree that when a congregation has completed the discernment process with integrity and has reached a position of variance in belief, we will apply the reasoning of Gamaliel: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But it is of God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-39). *Such a result should not be understood as a change in the position of the conference or denomination.* Regardless of the result of the study on the beliefs of the congregation, the congregation would remain accountable for the practices in the covenant.

⁸ This offers several key components. 1) there is a clear statement of God's ultimate longing for creation. 2) it reflects the Trinity; 3) it is embedded in the greatest commandments and therefore honors our most basic biblical commitment; 4) the vision is embodied in an incarnate person, Jesus, rather than conceptual commitments or virtues; and 5) the work of transformation is located in the power of the Holy Spirit. This offers a covenant that is precisely aligned with Vision: Healing and Hope and allows us to surrender our pretension to perfection.

⁹ Worship of God includes adoration, thanksgiving, confession of our sins to God and one another, assurance of forgiveness, intercession and communion.

¹⁰ One might ask how this practice is different than attending Sunday School. By naming this a basic practice of our covenantal life, our conference would need to re-appropriate significant structural and program resources to calling and equipping qualified Bible teachers and assessing teaching. Developing common understandings around what it means to be a teacher will be an important next step in this process. There would be good biblical basis for doing so. See James 3:1, I Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, II Timothy 4:3, Hebrews 5:12.

¹¹ Applying the scriptures in an Anabaptist perspective is often referred to as the “hermeneutic of obedience.” (See Stuart Murray’s *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, 2000). See also Appendix 3.

¹² Genesis 18:1-8; I Kings 17:8-24; Luke 10:1-20; Luke 24:13-35; Romans 12:9-13; Hebrews 13:2

¹³ The teaching of the Word was the highest priority to which the apostles gave themselves (Acts 6:1-7). It was the basic means of sharing the Gospel. In the places in the world where the church is growing, biblical and theological education are the primary methods of calling people to Christ

¹⁴ Minister’s Manual, p. 153

Appendix 1

Contrast of Contractual and Covenantal Relationships

Contractual Relationships	Covenantal Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individuals choose and create community as they deem necessary• Fosters a union of interests (is this church helping me grow, meeting my needs?)• Locate religious authority and accountability in the individual's personal relationship with God• Are conditional: If the community ceases to meet my needs, the relationship is legitimately nullified	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The community is the choice and gift of God• Fosters a union of persons (we give of our very selves to each other)• Locate authority and accountability in the church's mutual discernment.• Are unconditional: Grounded in the self-giving, steadfast love of God.

- Rodney Clapp, Families at the Crossroads, 1993



Appendix 2

Twelve Characteristics of Missional Congregations

1. *Missional character trait:* The missional church proclaims the Gospel.

Signpost: The story of God's salvation is faithfully repeated in a multitude of different ways.

2. *Missional character trait:* The missional church is a community where all members are involved in learning to become disciples of Jesus.

Signpost: The disciple identity is held by all; growth in discipleship is expected of all.

3. *Missional character trait:* The Bible is normative in this church's life. It sets the standard for our life as a people.

Signpost: The church reads the Bible together in the light of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to learn God's good and gracious intent for all creation, the way of salvation, and the identity and purpose of life together.

4. *Missional character trait:* The church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord.

Signpost: In its corporate life and public witness, the church is consciously seeking to conform to its Lord instead of the multitude of cultures in which it finds itself.

5. *Missional character trait:* The church seeks to discern God's specific missional vocation for the entire community and for all of its members.

Signpost: The church has made its "mission" its priority, and in overt and communal ways is seeking to be and do "what God is calling us to know, be, and do."

6. *Missional character trait:* A missional community is indicated by how Christians behave toward one another.

Signpost: Acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of one another both in the church and in the locale characterize the generosity of the community.

7. *Missional character trait:* The members are engaged in a community that practices reconciliation and embraces the diversity that God has created here on earth.

Signpost: The church community is moving beyond restricted cultural expressions toward becoming a community that is more diverse in its racial, ethnic, age, gender and socio-economic makeup.

8. *Missional character trait:* People within the community hold themselves accountable to one another in love.

Signpost: Substantial time is spent with one another, building trust and holding ourselves accountable to each other in love.

9. *Missional character trait:* The church practices hospitality.

Signpost: Welcoming the stranger into the midst of the community plays a central role.

10. *Missional character trait:* Worship is the central act by which the community celebrates with joy and thanksgiving both God's presence and God's promised future.

Signpost: There is significant and meaningful engagement in communal worship of God, reflecting appropriately and addressing the culture of those who worship together.

11. *Missional character trait:* This community has a vital public witness.

Signpost: The church makes an observable impact that contributes to the transformation of life, society, and human relationships.

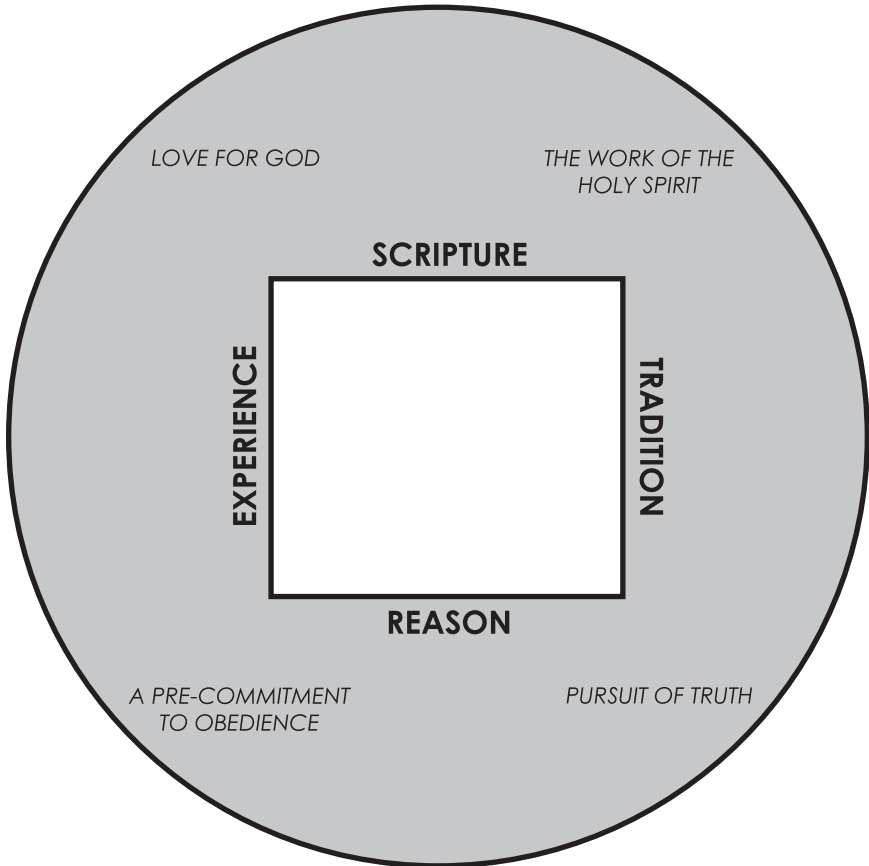
12. *Missional character trait:* There is a recognition that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God.

Signpost: There is a widely held perception that this church is going somewhere—and that somewhere is more faithfully lived life in the reign of God.

Mennonite Church USA Purposeful Plan, 2014, pp. 7-8

Appendix 3

A modified Wesleyan Quadrilateral that is aligned with an Anabaptist hermeneutic (approach to biblical interpretation).



Quoting Debra Hirsch: “Incorporating *Scripture* (as one’s primary source), *reason* (recognizing God has created us as rational beings able to comprehend and discover God’s truth), *tradition* (drawing on wisdom of the people of God, both past and present) along with *experience* (how we *feel*) helps us minimize the potential for being led astray or seeing emotions alone as the final authority.

“The work and guidance of the Holy Spirit is also crucial. The Spirit first inspired the writing of the Scriptures and continues to inspire and

guide us as we seek to interpret them, our history and personal experience. The Spirit bring us into the knowledge of God.”

Hirsch enhances the four components of the quadrilateral “with a commitment to the leading of the Holy Spirit, approaching scripture with a *pre-commitment to obey* it and guided by our primary commitment to the *love of God*, which is a necessary guard against idolatry and deception.

“The quadrilateral’s balanced approach validates our human *experience*- how we *feel* – but also protects it within the boundaries of *Scripture, tradition, and reason*. When these are governed by love for God, pursuit of truth, and a pre-commitment to obedience, no matter what the outcome, we have a powerful combination to guide us determining God’s truth and will for us.”

- Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*,
Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press

