

**Adopted, June 17, 2016  
by the delegates at Annual Meeting  
in Des Moines, IA by 89%**

## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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 reasonable 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.

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

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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

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

<sup>3</sup> Kanagy, *MC Frequencies Report*, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, Article 3.

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."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> It also describes twelve traits of the missional church.<sup>7</sup> 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."

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<sup>5</sup> 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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>*

### **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 God<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> (PP Trait 1, 2, 3)
  
4. We will accept and offer hospitality,<sup>12</sup> 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)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

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

<sup>10</sup> 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 qualified 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. See Appendix 4.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

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

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 4. (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 conference’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,)

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<sup>13</sup> 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

## 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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.

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<sup>14</sup> Minister’s Manual, p. 153

## Appendix 1

### Contrast of Contractual and Covenantal Relationships

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

- Rodney Clapp, Families at the Crossroads, 1993

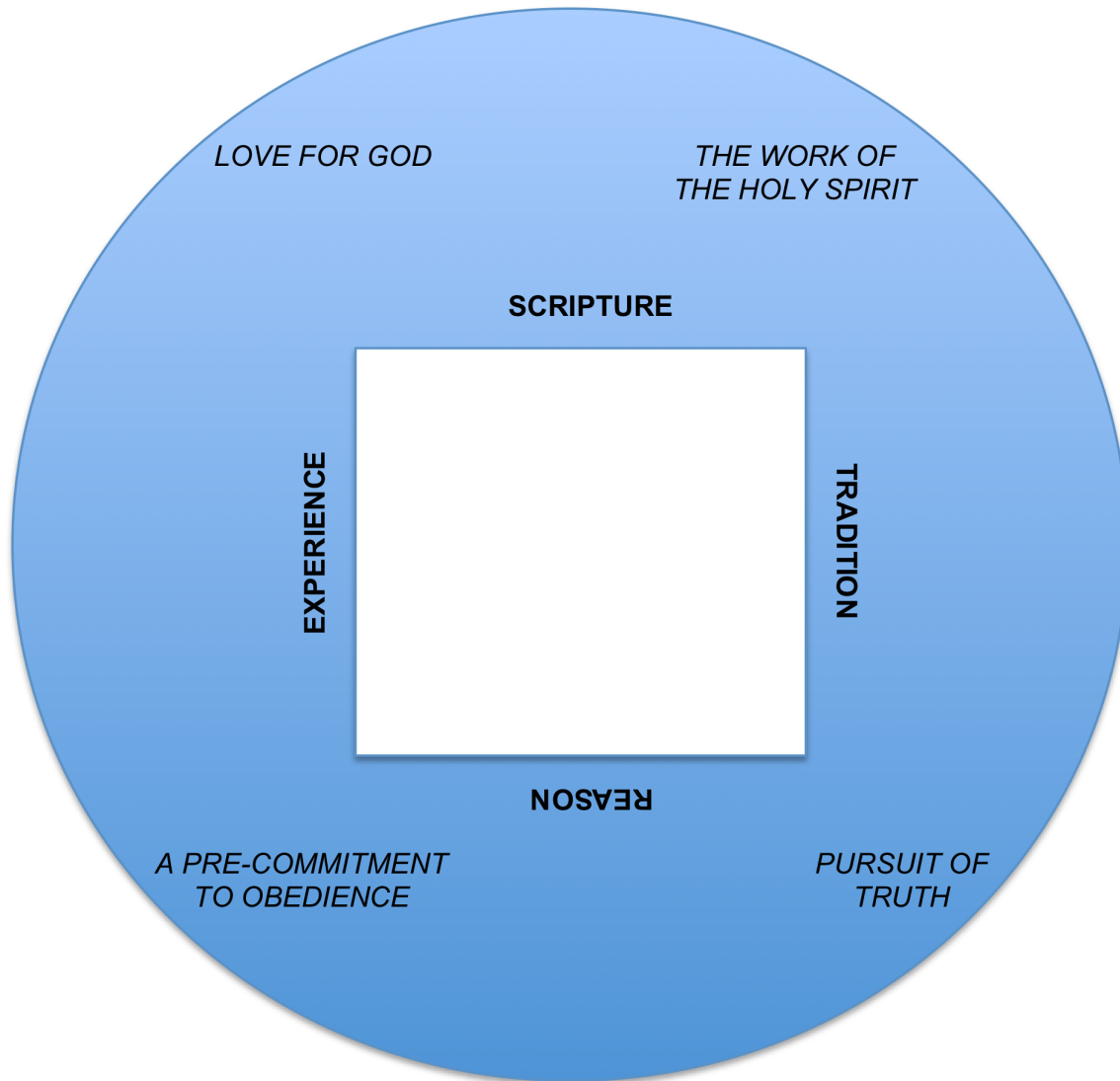
## Appendix 2 Twelve Characteristics of Missional Congregations

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. 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.



### 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: Intersity Press

## Appendix 4 Qualified Teachers

In a process of discernment at our Annual Meeting in 2015, conference delegates identified the biblical qualities and expectations consistent with qualified teachers. Based on that feedback, here are the qualities that people like to see in those leading Bible study in the congregation. These qualities are not to be seen as minimal requirements, but rather as qualities teachers would identify with and aspire to.

### Spiritual qualities

- Love for students and discovery
- Strong and sincere faith
- Full of wisdom and the Spirit
- Pure-hearted
- Patient and kind
- Respected and in good standing in the community of faith
- Evidences the fruits of the Spirit
- Not quarrelsome or perpetuating controversy

### Expectations

- Is diligent in his/her own study (a lifelong learner) and continually builds his/her knowledge of the scriptures
- Carefully prepares learning experiences using lesson plans with clear objectives
- Teaches with an awareness of the context of each scripture text in the long arc of the whole biblical story
- “Opens” the scriptures to the students as opposed to reducing the scriptures to pre-determined platitudes
- Teaches with an expectation that Bible study will produce change and growth toward obedience and spiritual maturity
- Speaks the truth in love, aspiring to create a learning space in which all can participate

### Types of teachers in the Covenant of Spiritual Practices

The Covenant of Spiritual Practices refers to two types of “qualified teachers.” The first type leads Bible study in congregational contexts, as in spiritual practices #3 and #5. Here, we are referring to those who lead Bible study for youth or adults in

congregational settings. We suggest the following qualifications for these teachers:

- attendance in a Mennonite congregation for a minimum of two years
- commitment to be guided by Mennonite theology and an Anabaptist hermeneutic (i.e., method of biblical interpretation) as described in Appendix 3
- willingness to attend teacher trainings to improve his or her skills in teaching and Bible study

The second type is the qualified teacher referred to in step 5 of “a process of discernment for differing beliefs and practices.” Here, we are referring to the person who will facilitate the study with the congregation considering differing beliefs or practices along with the congregation who agrees to study with them. The qualifications for these teachers include:

- training in biblical studies from a recognized program
- use of the Anabaptist approach to biblical interpretation (hermeneutic) described in Appendix 3
- commitment to the process and standards outlined in the covenant

Central Plains Mennonite Conference encourages each member congregation to identify and train a cohort of people with gifts for teaching and facilitating Bible study in congregational settings. The congregation would affirm these people for their gifts, encourage them to see themselves as Bible study leaders, and offer them training to improve their skills. The conference will offer no less than two trainings a year in which congregational teachers can participate.

-Discernment drawn from: Acts 6:1-7; Acts 5:33-39; I Corinthians 12:27-30; Ephesians 4:11-16; I Timothy 1:3-7; II Timothy 2:22-26; 4:3-5; Hebrews 5:12; James 3:1-2