

A Mission-Focused Approach To Congregations at Variance with Conference

Reclaiming a Missional-Focus for Congregational Associations:

From its beginnings, the Anabaptist movement took shape as leaders from local groups of rebaptizers gathered in order to articulate **common teaching for witness**. Early Anabaptist statements of faith were an attempt to reclaim the vision of the early church to a world increasingly hostile to Anabaptists. Articulating core values and **common teaching for witness** is the meaning of **mission**. This was the foundation that united the disparate groups of Anabaptists. This foundation was inherently missional. In more recent times associations of congregations have focused less on mission and more on conference administration. It has often been postulated that when the church stops focusing on mission it starts paying attention to conformity within the church. Such attention to conformity, in the absence of witness, often results in a divisive spirit. **Reclaiming common mission as the basis for congregational associations is pivotal in bringing a satisfactory resolution to the issue of variance among congregations.**

From its beginnings, the Anabaptist movement birthed a *confessional* rather than a *creedal* church. **Creeds** (e.g., Nicene, Apostles, articles that would become canon law) are created to refute heresies and determine when one's witness has fallen outside of orthodoxy. **Confessions** are created for the purpose of collecting the commonly held beliefs of the church for the purpose of instructing people into the way of faithful discipleship as followers of Jesus in a given historical context. In his forward to **One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith**, C.J. Dyck says, "Besides their apologetic use these...confessions **became a major form of witness** and, not least, instruments in the search for unity among the many diverse Anabaptist and Mennonite groups." While the confessions are intended to seek consensus (uniformity in belief), the focus of writing is in the form of temporal apologies for core beliefs. This we understand as witness.

The Schleithem and Dordrecht confessions were drafted as a way of defining the core values that united Anabaptists, and later Mennonites, for witness so that they would be accurately understood by their world and so that new persons coming into the church would be making an informed decision. The 1921 *Christian Fundamentals* was written not to supercede the Dordrecht Confession, but to restate it "in light of present religious contentions and teachings." It was written "for the sake of preserving the faith and **teaching the Gospel** as given by Christ." It was intended to be the primary teaching document whose use was to enable new believers to receive the teaching necessary to make an informed decision about following Jesus in the Mennonite tradition. General Conference Mennonites also developed confessions for the same purposes (1895, 1933, and 1941). These later confessions were written to re-appropriate the historic core beliefs of Mennonites in light of the fundamentalist debates in the first part of the twentieth century. Again the hoped for outcome was to clarify proper teaching.

The later confessions (1963 and 1995) were written for the same purpose. However, in the language of the 1963 confession we see a subtle shift in an attempt to dictate more specific behaviors than previous confessions (e.g., the role of women in leadership, the abstinence from the use of alcohol and tobacco products, and appropriate recreational activities). This kind of shift perhaps reinforced a tendency in the church to use its confession increasingly as a litmus test for membership rather than its intended instructional purpose. The stated purpose of all Mennonite confessions is for instruction in the commonly accepted teaching of the church, as a guide for belief and practice, to build a foundation for unity, and as an attempt to describe the Mennonite Church's beliefs as Christian witness, not as a formula for how one merits membership.

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While creeds and canon law are largely developed to refute heresy, the accent of confession falls on setting boundaries for commonly accepted teachings. By their very nature, the confessions are **witness-directed**. The core values that are articulated in the Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective (1995) (and any emerging position statements) **are the commonly held teaching positions of the churches within the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.**

Congregations at Variance

For purposes of definition, a “congregation at variance” is **a congregation whose expressed teaching varies from the confession of faith and emerging conference positions.** In other words, a congregation at variance with conference understandings is a congregation that does not actively proclaim the core values of the Mennonite Church.

The definition of a congregation at variance ought not to focus on the meaning of membership in congregations. We have inappropriately and chronically focused the issue of variance at the level of membership. This tendency has failed to take into consideration one very significant flaw. There is no way that any conference can pretend to examine every member of every congregation to determine if every member conforms in belief **and** practice to the commonly held teachings of the conference. Some have suggested that when persons join as members of a local congregation they are asked if they have adopted all the beliefs of the Mennonite Church. Interestingly, the questions prescribed by the Minister’s Manuals for membership ceremonies are for more general than this:

- ◆ Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ, God’s Son, our Lord; and in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life?
- ◆ Do you accept the Word of God as guide and authority for your life?
- ◆ Are you willing to give and receive counsel in the congregation?
- ◆ Are you ready to participate in the mission of the church?

(Minister’s Manual, p. 48)

None of the questions prescribed for membership reception ceremonies make reference to one’s unequivocal conformity to all the beliefs of the Mennonite Church, again confirming that the primary role of the confession of faith is not to be a litmus test for membership but a collection of commonly held teachings for common witness.

For Mennonites, one’s baptism is generally linked to one’s commitment to church membership. When the issue of membership is the focus of our process with congregations at variance, we have turned our understanding of baptism on its head. To determine that congregations are in conference or out of conference based on who is a member of the congregation suggests that baptism is conferred on those who have “arrived.” When one comes to the point of baptism in which they publicly state their desire to declare the lordship of Christ on their lives, they have signaled the beginning of a lifelong journey to understand what that means. They have, in fact, **begun** the lifelong journey of discipleship. We might even pose the question, “What is the point of lifelong discipleship if there is no felt need for growth to new understandings on the part of the believer because they have already arrived?”

As long as the Mennonite Church has attempted to resolve issues of variance by focusing on the conformity of member beliefs, the Mennonite Church has had little success in positive outcomes over the past 20 years. Only in isolated instances has a resolution been successfully negotiated. In most cases, the attempt resulted in the severance of relationship rather than the hoped-for outcome of the best in Mennonite witness: discipleship into faithfulness.

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A More Hopeful Focus for Dealing with Congregations at Variance: Discipleship into Faithfulness

Because the purpose of confessions is to instruct members into faithfulness rather than to defend against heresy, determining how conference relates to congregations at variance should focus on the teaching leaders of congregations in the conference. By teaching leaders we would include credentialed leaders along with those who, in turn, give oversight to the spiritual instruction in a congregation. Such additional leaders would include elders, deacons, and Sunday School personnel. Focusing on the teaching leadership of congregations as a basis for defining congregations at variance gives congregations the latitude necessary to define the structure membership in a way that has integrity with the **particular mission** of the congregation in its unique context.

While the church encourages all believers to embrace the highest standard of New Testament living, the Mennonite leadership polity statement places the responsibility for representing the church and her teachings with credentialed (commissioned, licensed, and ordained) congregational leaders.

4. We entrust an office of ministry to the person being ordained. We thereby empower this person **to act in a representative way on the church's behalf** with both the privileges and the responsibilities of the office. With this ministerial office, we recognize an authority which is granted for leadership within the church. Paradoxically, this authority must constantly be earned by evidence of wisdom, competence, integrity, humility, and perception.
5. We call the person being ordained to particular tasks associated with this office: **to preach and teach**; to lead with vision and wisdom; to equip members to release their spiritual gifts; to provide pastoral care, to be responsible for the church's rites of marriage, baptism, observance of the Lord's Table; **and to help represent the church in the local community and in the conference.**"

(A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership, p. 26)

It is in the ordination ceremony that we see the focus again turned toward congregational leadership in upholding the core values of the Mennonite Church's teaching points.

Q: Will you respect and be guided by the beliefs and practices of the Mennonite church [and the work of this congregation and conference]?

While the exact meaning of "respect and be guided by" may be argued, it is clearly the intent of the question to ask the prospective leader to place him/herself in the middle of the stream of Mennonite core values and teaching.

A congregation at variance therefore is a congregation in which the teaching leaders of the congregation are embracing and/or supporting a value that is inconsistent with the Mennonite Confession of Faith and the emerging position statements of conference.

Determining when a Congregation is at Variance

The Pastoral Leadership Committee serves as the examiner of credentialed leaders in congregations and the consistency of their teaching with the confession of faith. This is done at the point of installation, commissioning, or licensing, and again at ordination. Further checks and balances may come into play as concerns and questions arise from congregational members who sense that teaching within the congregation has drifted from the confession of faith. The conference will likely need to rely heavily on strong relationships developed between congregations, their leaders, and conference ministers when variance emerges for how such variance is resolved.

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As the spiritual leader of a congregation, the credentialed leader by extension bears responsibility for the instruction that takes place by lay leaders within the congregation. It is the task of the credentialed leader with the support of lay leaders to equip and correct teachers in the congregation so that the congregation can be disciplined into faithfulness and have a witness of integrity.

Redemptive Discipline for Congregations at Variance

When conference leaders are aware that the teaching leaders of a congregation are proclaiming a teaching at variance with the core values of the conference or are aware that the credentialed leaders of the congregation are unable to correct the variant teaching of congregational members, conference leaders will initiate a process of discernment with the leaders of the congregation. Central to the process of discernment will be the model of confrontation as outlined in Matthew 18. Conference leaders may choose to appoint an ad hoc task group to facilitate the dialogue with the congregation at variance. The goal of the discernment process is to disciple congregational leadership into faithful witness.

Institutions by their very nature are conservative. Conference, as an institution, inherently supports and reinforces the conventional tradition of the church. While the church needs to make room for the prophetic voice that calls for new expressions of witness in varying contexts, the defense for variant expressions of witness falls to the credentialed leaders of congregations. The burden of proof for variant expressions of faithfulness and witness within congregations must be argued at the initiative of congregational leaders within Anabaptist understanding of scriptural interpretation as outlined in the "Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective," article 4. Refusal to provide a satisfactory argument should result in appropriate discipline for the credentialed leader (See "A Mennonite Polity for Leadership," p. 125).

In some cases the argument for variant expressions of witness may rise from lay leaders in the congregation. This shift in perspective may result in a situation where it is no longer safe for the credentialed leader to proclaim the accepted teachings of the conference. When this is the case, the conference will provide all the advocacy that it can to strengthen the leader for the task of calling the congregation to compliance in its teaching. When a congregation's unwillingness to support the credentialed leader in proclaiming the core values of the conference results in pastoral termination, the conference can refuse to acknowledge the credentials of new leadership for the congregation until the congregation agrees to allow leadership to proclaim the commonly accepted teachings of the conference. As the congregations determines the authority under which new leadership will be authorized to serve, the congregation's point of attachment to an association will become clear.

When a question of variance comes to the attention of conference leadership, and initial discussion with the congregation's leaders indicates that the congregation may be at variance with the core teachings of the conference, then the conference council may temporarily designate the congregation as "under review" until a process of discernment is concluded. During the discernment process, the congregation will continue to retain its membership privileges, including the right to voting delegates. The "under review" designation is intended to be a temporary designation which signals to conference congregations that a process of discernment is underway. Upon concluding the process of discernment, conference leaders in consultation with the congregation under review, will make a recommendation to the delegate body about the ongoing relationship between the congregation and the conference.

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