

Procedures for Responding to Tension-Producing Differences within Ohio Conference

Understandings that shape these procedures of response.

1. As the church seeks to be relevant in a changing world, differences in understandings and practices are more than likely to develop. These differences stem from various roots, such as:

- a. tradition orientation versus movement orientation.
- b. mission outreach--relating to persons with much different backgrounds.
- c. diverse interpretations of the Bible, following different streams of teaching.
- d. congregational individualism (congregationalism), with insufficient mutual communication and care.

Some diversity is not only to be expected, but can be accepted and welcomed. The goal is unity, not uniformity, in all things. Some of the differences, however, do result in tension and disunity.

2. In this age, as has been true in the past, the Mennonite Church somehow drifts into a pattern of selectivity with respect to faithfulness and sin. Some attitudes and behaviors receive a great deal of attention while others are minimized or ignored. Some issues are overloaded while others are neglected. The confusion is compounded by the fact that a few behaviors that were once considered sin no longer are. It is also true that the church has come to greater sensitivity in some areas of faithfulness. Evenhandedness with respect to biblical teaching requires diligence and honesty.

3. Useful dialogue between those with differing positions will need to take place in a context of respect and openness, guarding against faulty assumptions about what others believe and avoiding the temptation to demonize those with whom they disagree.

4. Conference membership/affiliation means accountability, both to the Conference and between congregations. Jesus' rule in Matthew 18:15-20 is relevant to intercongregational as well as interpersonal relationships.

5. These procedures need to be applicable to a broad range of issues involving disagreement and divergent practice, and thus do not address specific points of disagreement. They need to encompass how we handle prophetic dissent as well as clear violations of biblical teaching as delineated from a Mennonite perspective in the Confession of Faith and position statements.

6. The primary intent of a healthy process of resolution is that of achieving wholeness in the new community of faith, not of defining how to expel congregations perceived to be unfaithful. The process should be in the mode and tone of restorative discipline (in the best sense of the word discipline) and ought not be the track for a rigid legalism. Wholeness may also mean openness to prophetic challenges.

7. The process must provide for ways to discern which are the weightier matters for which discipline or change is appropriate and which are matters about which we find we can accept diversity of conviction and practice. Procedural steps need to take into account that unfaithfulness involves not only doing what is wrong, but not doing what is right.

8. The positions congregations take in faith, polity and practice often are shaped largely by the teaching of the designated leader(s), whether those positions are consonant or dissonant with the accepted conference standards. Therefore, attention needs to be given early to discerning the source of divergent views. We have built-in provisions for keeping in touch with the thinking of pastors and congregational leaders through pastoral search processes, pre-call interviews, mentoring, and attentive regional pastors and conference minister.

9. Pastors who avail themselves of fellowship and growth experiences, such as Pastor Peer Groups, have opportunity for dialogue and mutual accountability.

10. A number of New Testament texts should help to inform how the church functions in the areas of mutual accountability and discipline. These include: Matthew 18; Acts 15; Rom. 14:1--15:6; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 5:11-21; Gal. 3:25-29; Gal. 6:1-10; Eph. 2:12-22; Eph. 4; Phil. 4:2-9; 2 Tim. 2:14--3:9; Titus 3:1-10; Heb. 12:12-17; 1 John 4:1-10.

11. Power imbalances are a reality in almost all conflicts between individuals, congregations, and conference. Power inequities need to be recognized and abuses of power avoided. Both those who hold identified positions of power by virtue of their office, prestige and access to resources as well as those who perceive themselves as powerless can slip into patterns of intimidation and coercion which obstruct the process of a faithful resolution of differences.

12. When congregations threaten to withdraw from conference membership because of conference disciplinary action or lack of it, conference leadership needs to exercise spiritual wisdom in discerning whether the threat is in fact evidence of a rift in fellowship or whether it is a power tactic to try to precipitate desired action.

13. If differing views and practices become conference-congregation issues, "resolution" may mean:
- a. a congregation decides to become compliant with the accepted conference standards and positions;
 - b. the parties involved (having registered their concerns) are able to accept the diversity;
 - c. determination that a thorough study is in order, with potential outcomes of change or of reaffirmation;
 - d. Ohio Conference decides that faithfulness means changing its official position on the precipitating issue;
 - e. Ohio Conference reaffirms its official position regarding the issue, identifies any congregation that is not acting in accord, and that congregation acknowledges its noncompliance, but no action is taken to sever or modify the relationship with Conference;
 - f. a congregation may voluntarily withdraw conference membership;
 - g. a divergent congregation is given, by Annual Conference Assembly action, a membership status with limited privileges;
 - h. action by Annual Conference Assembly to terminate a congregation's formal conference membership.

14. Thorough study of tension-producing issues can be helpful, and may be imperative, for coming to resolution. A need for serious study may originate from:

- a. issues arising out of particular congregational witness;

- b. prophetic efforts to bring about change;
- c. discernment that opinions on either side of the disagreement are based more on comfortable conventions or cultural pressure than on a consistent interpretation of the biblical revelation.
- d. divergent views being defended from the Bible.

If and when it is determined and agreed on that inter-congregational conversation and/or serious study of an issue is called for, congregations that do not follow through on their commitment imperil the integrity of the whole process.

15. The Ohio Conference has adopted the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995), and recognizes the position statements on various issues adopted by Mennonite General Assembly as official Ohio Conference statements (unless counter positions are adopted). The guidelines, Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love (1995) have also been adopted and promoted by Conference Council.

Procedures to be followed.

(The following steps are generally in a sequential order, although which steps are relevant, and in what order, will need to be determined with each specific situation.)

1. Before differences in belief and practice become points of tension between congregations and between conference and congregations, Regional Pastors and conference minister have natural opportunities to take note of how the gospel is being applied to current issues in the congregations. As pastors of pastors these staff persons have opportunity to keep in touch with the foci and agenda of the pastors. If they become aware of divergent views, teaching and policies, they can share helpful guidance and counsel with the pastors (and leadership teams, as appropriate), and offer additional relevant resources.
2. Pastors serving Conference congregations have the privilege and responsibility of caring for each other. They have opportunity in informal contacts and in structured groups (such as Pastor Peer and other regular area meetings) to encourage each other and to hold each other accountable for faithful teaching. Concerns about digressions from accepted norms in doctrine, practice and polity should not be ignored but communicated directly (Matthew 18 fashion), pastor to pastor.
3. The Leadership Commission, as custodian of ministerial credentials, carries on-going responsibility to assure that pastors in their personal lives and in their teaching/leading remain true to Christ and the Word as delineated in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. The Leadership Commission can encourage and admonish, and it has authority to suspend or withdraw ministerial credentials for misconduct and doctrinal deviation. [Guidelines for Discipline Regarding Ministerial Credentials (MC/GC, 1993) offers procedures for credentialing bodies to respond fairly and consistently when concerns arise about the integrity of ministerial credentials.]
4. Congregations are obligated by their mutual commitment in conference membership to inform and seek counsel from neighboring congregations when they are considering actions that do not conform to accepted norms or that may be construed as unfaithfulness.
5. If one or more congregations develop concerns about the stance and behavior of another congregation(s) they are encouraged to have leadership representatives go directly to the leadership

of the congregation(s) perceived to be digressing. They must go to listen, to be sure the facts are accurate, to express concerns, and to seek resolution. The likelihood of this venture taking place and its fruitfulness will be greatly enhanced if the respective Regional Pastor facilitates and guides the conversation. Misuse of power imbalances between congregations needs to be guarded against.

6. If the regional pastors and the conference minister, in their regular contacts with congregations, become aware of congregations independently engaging in or considering actions that are not in accord with accepted norms of doctrine, practice, or polity, they are to begin to work directly with those congregations and their leaders. These staff persons then have access to the resources of the conference leadership (i.e., Executive Committee) through the conference minister and to relevant commissions.

7. It may be feasible and advisable to explore and process differences in faith and practice with an area group. (Pastor Peer Groups have served this purpose. Clusters, depending on size, acquaintance among the congregations, and group structures and experience, may be a helpful setting.)

8. It is advisable for Conference leadership and staff persons to consult with denominational leadership and with counterparts in other conferences, especially if the issue under discussion also affects the wider church experience and relationships.

9. At some point it may be prudent to use an ad hoc task group/committee with wisdom, experience and objectivity (see attachment regarding the formations of such a group), appointed by and accountable to the Executive Committee, with clearly delineated responsibilities that may include:

- a. to discern the magnitude of the issue, and thus determine whether to work at it locally or to involve the Annual Conference Assembly;
- b. to discern if the nature of the issue calls for a study process;
- c. to consult with persons who have been seeking resolution and who will have a continuing role with the pastors and congregations involved;
- d. to work with the parties in tension toward understanding and acceptable resolution, at the level appropriate to the scope of relational tension;
- e. to make use of conference and denominational resources;
- f. to bring recommendations to Annual Conference Assembly, in consultation with the Executive Committee (if it is discerned that Annual Conference Assembly should consider some kind of action).

10. In every step efforts to bring about resolution must be supported with concerted prayer by all who are affected, seeking the mind of Christ.

11. If the pertinent steps above have been followed and there continues to be intercongregational tension over the divergent behavior of one or more congregations, the matter may be brought to the Conference Assembly. In the context of thorough reporting and a call to prayer, the ad hoc group (with approval of the Executive Committee) may bring a recommendation that may include any or all of the following (requiring a majority vote of the Annual Conference Assembly):

- a. that congregations whose positions and practices have come into question take seriously the

- voice of the Annual Conference Assembly;
- b. that the Conference congregations agree to engage in serious study (biblical and otherwise) of the issue(s) being raised and in honest dialogue between those with differing perspectives.
- c. that for a period of up to a year efforts will continue by the ad hoc group to achieve a satisfactory resolution, without any restrictions on the congregation's membership and privileges, or the credentials of ministerial leadership.

12. If a year of prayer and effort produces movement but not satisfactory resolution, the time frame may be extended. However, if after a reasonable time of seeking acceptable resolution, neither the conference nor the deviating congregation is disposed to change or modify positions, the Executive Committee may request the ad hoc group to bring a further recommendation to the Annual Conference Assembly, either:

- a. to accept the difference(s) as one(s) on which we disagree, even sharply, but in love, and not warranting separation of relationship. [60% majority required], or
- b. to place the divergent congregation(s) in a limited relationship with the conference, designated as "restricted membership." [60% majority required]

The restrictions could include any or all of the following:

- 1) suspension of delegate privileges, including voting.
- 2) no financial subsidy.
- 3) refrain from promoting the divergent position in the conference.

(These restrictions do not exclude attending Annual Conference Assembly or other conference functions, or requesting conference resources (other than financial). Continuing ministerial credentials are at the discretion of the Leadership Commission, and dependent on the position of the pastor(s) with respect to the precipitating issue.)

It is not intended that "restricted membership" be a long-term relational status for member congregations. Rather, it is a way to recognize serious discord while working toward an acceptable resolution.

13. When it becomes clear that a congregation is not in accord with Conference positions, but does not voluntarily withdraw Conference affiliation, unilateral action by the Conference may become necessary as recognition that the noncompliant congregation has chosen to go its own way. Conference action at this point acknowledges what has been in fact a congregation action. Thus, as a last resort, the Annual Conference Assembly may take action on a recommendation of the Executive Committee to discontinue the membership of a dissident congregation in a spirit of humble regret. (See Ohio Conference constitution, Art. IV, D, 4.) [70 % majority required] Whether this action would also terminate ministerial credentials is at the discretion of the Leadership Commission (as in 9., above).

14. Healed relationship should be appropriately celebrated, and severed relationships appropriately mourned.

15. Making a change in formal membership status does not mean there is to be no further contact or conversation between the Conference (and its member congregations) and the congregation(s) in question. Concern for reconciliation in God's grace should both motivate and shape further dialogue, in hope of future harmony and membership reaffiliation.

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Documents relevant to this proposal:

- A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership (GC/MC,1996)
- Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love (GC/MC,1995)
- Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (GC/MC,1995)
- Constitution of the Ohio Conference of the Mennonite Church (1996)
- Guidelines for Discipline Regarding Ministerial Credentials (GC/MC,1993)
- Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual (Mennonite Conciliation Services, 1997)

Drafting and revising this document was assigned to the Theological Resource Committee by the Conference Executive Committee.

Accepted by the Ohio Conference Annual Assembly as a working document.
July 11, 1998, Bluffton, Ohio.

Attachment to:

Procedures for Responding to Tension-Producing Differences in Ohio Conference

Forming an Ad Hoc Group

(The following guidelines, based on the experience and counsel of Mennonite Conciliation Services, are appended for consideration by the Ohio Conference Executive Committee when it is deemed expedient to utilize an ad hoc group.)

1. An ad hoc group is best utilized early rather than late. There are better chances of facilitating communication before tensions are high. After polarizations have escalated such groups have limited productivity.
2. An optimum size is 3-5 members.
3. Include one or more persons with process experience and/or conciliation training. (Mennonite Conciliation Services can help identify qualified persons within the conference area.)
4. Committee members should either not be too closely identified with the substantive issue, or the membership should be fairly representative of the various viewpoints.
5. The group/committee is appointed by and accountable to the Executive Committee, in a relationship similar to that of a standing committee. An Executive Committee member may serve on the ad hoc committee as a liaison.
6. The mandate and level of authority needs to be specified clearly, so that the committee is free to function with appropriate authority.
7. Further suggestions are found in the Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual.