

1 Mennonite Church Canada Assembly
2 June 5-7, 2009

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4 **Being a Faithful Church:**
5 **Testing the Spirits in the Midst of Hermeneutical Ferment**

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8 **Background**

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10 The General Board of Mennonite Church Canada monitors the spiritual health of our
11 church. This is not an easy task, because it is not easy to be the church, in Canada, in the
12 21st century. Some writers have, in fact, suggested that Canada is a country with “very
13 hard soil” for the gospel of Jesus Christ: one of the hardest anywhere in the world. We
14 face challenges, and each one is worth facing with the integrity of being the church.

15

16 The General Board understands that the ongoing health of our church requires that we
17 continue to strengthen our overall capacity to discern¹ the mind of God as the church
18 engages the critical agenda of our time. This need/capacity to discern is important in all
19 aspects of our life together. It is important in how we worship, and in how we organize. It
20 is also important in how we respond to questions of faithfulness that are within and
21 among us. The General Board, along with other circles of counsel, tries to discern what
22 the important themes are that require ongoing attention. Themes that have been identified
23 in the last years are:

24

- 25 a) Unity and Diversity in the life of the Church;
- 26 b) Being a Peace church;
- 27 c) Confessing and witnessing to Jesus Christ as Lord in a religiously pluralistic
28 context;
- 29 d) Human sexuality in the life of the church;
- 30 e) Ecological concerns from a perspective of faith.

31

32 The need to be a biblically-grounded people is not new, but it is important to re-ignite our
33 commitment and our capacity to be a people of God’s Word. Specifically, this means
34 that:

35

- 36 1) We covenant with each other to study the Bible together and explore the biblical
37 teachings.
- 38 2) We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving
39 dialogue with each other in the body of Christ. We are all sinners in need of God's
40 grace and we know that the Holy Spirit can lead us to further truth and to
41 repentance where needed.
- 42 3) We covenant compassion and prayer for each other.

¹ The words “discern” and “discernment” come from the Latin *discernere*. *Cernere* means to separate, distinguish, or sift. *Dis* means to take off. It is a good word to talk about the need to sift, and to test what is among us. The Greek New Testament word most often translated as “discern” is *dokimazo* (used 31 times). This word, too, refers to testing, examining, and interpreting. It is a continuous process of faith in God and faithfulness to God.

- 1 4) We covenant to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness
2 to each other.
3 5) We covenant with God that as we discern his will for our lives and our fellowship
4 we will seek to obey it, through his grace and strength.
5
6

7 **Purpose:**

8 This paper is a resource to help us think together how spiritual discernment may nourish
9 our faithfulness to God's will for the church in our world.
10

11 **Why now?**

12
13 As a national church we are facing the complex reality that while different parts of our
14 Body (Priesthood of Believers) are reflecting on the **same** foundational scripture, guided
15 by the **same** Holy Spirit, revealing the mind/will of the **same** God, we are discerning
16 what appear, at times, to be contradictory and irreconcilable directions in understanding
17 Christian faithfulness.
18

19 Hermeneutical² diversity is not new, neither in Christian ecumenical nor Mennonite
20 experience. Such diversity has been/is present in understanding God's will in:
21 circumcision, slavery, the role of women in ministry, pacifism, economic models, relation
22 to creation, church structure, ecclesial authority and autonomy, and so on. It is important,
23 therefore, to ask why we need to pay special attention to our capacity to discern within
24 our denomination *now*. The answer, by necessity, is more related to the *art* of being the
25 church than to the *science* of hermeneutical process. Basically, we believe that churchly
26 faithfulness to scripture comes to life within an Anabaptist community through our
27 common commitment to "sift," and to seek clarity in our desire to be God's obedient
28 people.
29

- 30 1) As Mennonites, we believe that the church needs to be scripturally grounded, and
31 that hermeneutics are ecclesially³-based. Both of these elements signal to us that
32 we need to take a close look at what is happening among us.
33 2) We are committed to being the church amid the spiritual unrest and ferment that is
34 among us.
35

36 What follows is an attempt to think organically and organizationally about the
37 ingredients/components that the task of careful discernment places before us. The Book
38 of Proverbs says that:

39
40 *Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with a multitude of counselors they succeed*
41 *(Prov.15:22).*
42

43 This is wise counsel for us in our time too. We are not, of course, starting at point zero.
44 Very much discernment and many processes are already a part of our experience as a

² Hermeneutics comes from the Greek language, *hermeneutikos*, and refers to the skill of interpretation, the capacity to make something clear.

³ *Ecclesial* comes from the Greek New Testament word *ekklesia* which means "church."

1 denomination. None of what is stated here is meant to negate the efforts that have gone
2 before. Indeed, quite the opposite. What is stated here is building on these efforts and is
3 made possible only because of these many other encounters and processes that are
4 already part of our communal experience. We acknowledge each of these with gratitude.
5

6 **The Ongoing Task: Is Discernment Necessary?**

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8 Seeking clarity in faithfulness in Christian life is the never-ending, non-optional vocation
9 of God's people. Such discernment is a critical component of the ongoing learning
10 needed for faithfulness in the world. Several biblical texts remind us of this ongoing task:
11

12 **Luke 12:54-56:**

13 Jesus teaches that "interpreting the times" (literally: the *kairos* of God) must be as
14 constant a discipline of the church as understanding weather patterns that shape
15 our life. He laments the lack of capacity to do that. The inability or the
16 unwillingness to discern the times is either due to hypocrisy, creates hypocrisy, or
17 both.

18 **Matthew 18:1-35 (see also John 20:22-23):**

19 One of the amazing, and in its context, heretical tasks given to the church is to
20 deal with sin: to discern it, to forgive it, or to retain it. That this task is given to
21 the "two or three" as they gather together in the name of Christ is a very large
22 and, heretofore, inconceivable responsibility. The assumptions till then had been
23 that this was the sole responsibility of God. The first step in dealing with sin is to
24 discover it and to name it. The criteria for doing so are not provided in this text.
25 This must be the ongoing vocation of the gathered church.

26 **I John 4, 5:**

27 The potential for false teaching within the church is significant. The church's
28 discipleship/faithfulness antennae must always be on high alert. The church is
29 given the task of "testing the spirits, to see if they are of God" (I John 4:1). The
30 reason for this is because the spiritual sources of common wisdom and practice
31 may not always be readily evident, i.e. it is not always immediately clear which
32 "spirits" are nurturing common assumptions.

33 **John 16:1-15:**

34 Jesus promises his disciples that when he leaves he will send the Spirit, the
35 Paraclete, to accompany them. One of the key functions of this Spirit in the midst
36 of the community is the ongoing task of teaching them what truth is, where it is to
37 be found, and how it needs to be practiced. The hermeneutical community under
38 the guidance of the Holy Spirit thus becomes the locus of authoritative
39 discernment of God's will revealed in Holy Scripture and in contextual practice.
40

41 The common element in all of these passages is the assumption that discerning the mind
42 of God in order to be a faithful people of God is an ongoing task. Indeed, this is more
43 than a mere task: it is a foundational vocation of what it means to be God's people,
44 incarnate in the world, in order to save it from its destructive potential.
45

46 For Anabaptists, the authority of scripture is understood to be unleashed only when God's
47 people carefully and prayerfully discern the will of God through the presence of the Holy
48 Spirit guiding the church into an understanding of scripture that reflects God's will for

1 the world. Scripture, according to this understanding, loses its functional authority for our
2 world when the community becomes hermeneutically unfaithful or dysfunctional.
3 Scripture and experience both point to two important ingredients as we engage the
4 ongoing task of discernment:

- 5
- 6 a) God has been with us. We can be confident in what has been. There is enough life
7 lived, truth revealed, and wisdom absorbed that provide a sufficient platform for
8 faithful living.
 - 9 b) God will be with us. We must be open to spiritual surprises. It is not that there is
10 new spiritual truth invented, but the Spirit can uncover old truths for us in
11 surprising ways. It is the ongoing, often vulnerable, responsibility of the church to
12 remain open to the surprises that God may have in store for us.

13

14 These two ingredients may appear to be in tension. And they may generate
15 misunderstanding, conflict, threat, and impatience. But both ingredients come from the
16 same source, God, and we need not fear. It is the vocation of the church to walk in this
17 tension.

18

19 Yet, even as the church engages the process of discernment, we confess that, at best, we
20 will only understand “through a glass darkly [or in a mirror dimly]” (I Cor. 13:12). Our
21 definitions and pronouncements are never the last word. Our discernment, too, comes
22 under the judgment of the Spirit of Truth and the wisdom of God revealed in God’s
23 *kairos* (time) and in our *chronos* (time). Doctrine, theology, and confession do not
24 replace the living Word of God, that continually brings us into fuller truth and
25 understanding that reflects the eternal will of God for his world.

26

27 **Practical Options**

28

29 The practical implication of such ongoing discernment is that the church will always
30 speak, and then it must always speak again. And when it speaks again, it will have three
31 options, each of which can potentially be a faithful or an unfaithful option. Many
32 examples could be given. We will limit ourselves to only a few:

- 33
- 34 a) The church can repeat again what it has said before:
 - 35 **Example from the Bible:** Jesus’ reference to part of the *shema* as the
 - 36 greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with
 - 37 all your mind, and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself.”
 - 38 **Example from church history:** Mennonites reaffirming their
 - 39 understanding of pacifism in spite of the persecution against them from
 - 40 without, and the pressures from within in the 16th century and during
 - 41 World War I and II.
 - 42 b) The church can modify what it has said before, given some new spiritual
 - 43 understandings. This would normally mean that it can move further but in the
 - 44 same direction that it has moved before.
 - 45 **Example from the Bible:** Jesus’ desire to fulfil and not to abolish the law
 - 46 with his six references to: “You have heard that it was said ... But I say to
 - 47 you...”

1 **Example from church history:** Mennonites slowly moving from an
2 understanding of “non-resistance” to “non-violent resistance.”

- 3 c) The church can change what it has said before because new perspectives have
4 become apparent and compelling, and shifting the relative authority of canonical
5 voices has been discerned to be necessary.

6 **Example from the Bible:** The understanding of the “chosen people” to
7 include the Gentiles in a new way, which in turn changed the
8 understanding of circumcision and food laws in affirming what “seemed
9 good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

10 **Example from church history:** The church’s defence of slavery not being
11 justifiable, and the equal role of women in the ministry of the church to be
12 good.

13
14 There is always tension between *sufficient wisdom* and *spiritual surprise* as the church is
15 intentional about discernment. Therefore, the church will not (cannot) know which of the
16 three outcomes it will experience. Spiritual/biblical discernment ultimately is an exercise
17 of faith in and submission to the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of God’s
18 community. The church always engages discernment on the foundation of what it has
19 discerned before. Discernment does not mean that we are adrift or that there is no anchor.
20 We are confident in the past presence of God with us, and the sufficiency of the wisdom
21 that has been discerned. Discernment does not presuppose change, but it is open to
22 surprises engineered by the Holy Spirit. This means that while the foundation is solid,
23 where discernment will end up is not predetermined. It is open to the inherent tension of
24 sufficiency and surprise. The church need not, however, fear. A discerning community
25 will come to the point where it can say “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to
26 us...” (Acts 15:28). And this is the trust and faith that allows the church to be the church,
27 engaging its God-given vocation of confronting sin and engaging obedience. Conversely,
28 a church that avoids, refuses, or cannot engage its vocation of ongoing discernment
29 cannot be the church.

30 31 **Being a Faithful Church**

32
33 Spiritual discernment engages us in deliberate processes that help us face the challenges
34 in the life of the church. What is at stake, fundamentally, is not whether a previous
35 position will be re-stated (spiritual sufficiency) or whether a new road will be forged
36 (spiritual surprise). What is at stake is our capacity to be the church in fulfilling our
37 ongoing vocation of discerning the *kairos* of God for our time. In other words, the
38 primary issue is not what exactly we will decide about the challenges that face us; the
39 primary issue is whether we can be the church in doing so. It is very important not to lose
40 sight of this fundamental focus.

41
42 This, however, begs an all important question. What are the ingredients that make the
43 church the church as it engages tough and potentially divisive conversations? Let us
44 suggest a few key ingredients that are foundational:

- 45
46 1) Understand that we are engaging a spiritual exercise. Spiritual discernment is not
47 focused on personal preferences, peer pressure, social niceties, political
48 correctness, scientific debate, or institutional power. While all these undoubtedly

- 1 shape and influence us, we must understand our process to be focussed on
2 discerning the mind of God for our lives for our time. We have the full assurance
3 that God’s Spirit will be present, and that we need not fear the outcomes. And we
4 can be grateful that God is God and we are not.
- 5 2) Understand that as a spiritual exercise, we will engage seriously the spiritual
6 disciplines as taught to us by our Lord. Such a process needs to be bathed in
7 prayer for each other, meeting together with each other, studying scripture
8 together, fasting, worship, listening, celebration, discernment, conversation, and a
9 commitment to learn.
- 10 3) Understand that we are engaging an ecclesial (churchly) exercise. We believe that
11 in God’s wisdom, the church has been called to be the primary vehicle for
12 teaching and living out the good news of God’s Kingdom present in the world.
13 We are, therefore, confident that an ecclesial process is necessary, sufficient, and
14 good for us at this time – and in fact at any time. In doing so, we are engaging
15 conversations about the life of the church. It makes sense that those who
16 participate would do so from the basis of a commitment to make the church strong
17 and faithful.
- 18 4) Understand that God’s Spirit and therefore God’s wisdom are not confined to the
19 church. Because this is a spiritual exercise, the domain for understanding the
20 Spirit’s work in the world is the world itself. This suggests that we should not be
21 surprised to discover and learn spiritual truth from individuals, groups, society,
22 science, politics, and institutions. “Interpreting the signs of the times” means to
23 interpret what God is doing within and beyond the church in order to bring about
24 his Kingdom.
- 25 5) Understand that by engaging an ecclesial process, internal to the church, we
26 believe the church to be a priesthood of all believers. This suggests that all
27 “priests” of the church are welcome to participate and each of these voices needs
28 to be heard with integrity and sincerity. It does not mean that each priest stands
29 before God in a way unaccountable to the priesthood. The priesthood of all
30 believers does not mean full agreement of all priests with the priesthood. It does
31 mean taking seriously the voice of the priesthood, even when our personal
32 opinions or preferences may differ. It means being confident that God’s Spirit will
33 work through the church as a community of discernment as is promised in
34 scripture.
- 35 6) Understand that our commitment to be the church as a priesthood of believers will
36 mean that there will be those who want to advocate for the sufficiency of what has
37 been discerned till now, and those who will advocate for change based on their
38 view of the surprises of the Spirit through a re-reading of experience and
39 scripture. It would be normal to have advocates in such a process, but we would
40 understand that advocacy is done to strengthen the Body of Christ in faithfulness
41 to God, not for the purpose of winning. Because advocates are needed in such a
42 process, the process itself must not be polarized, much less adversarial.
- 43 7) Understand that such a process would, naturally, desire to come to a point of the
44 church speaking again. As indicated, this might mean saying the same thing,
45 modifying previous speech, or change direction from previous discernment. In
46 other words, while the process may be long, it is not entirely open-ended.
- 47 8) Understand that this process is designed to energize, not drain, the missional
48 capacities of the church. When we understand discernment as fulfilling the

1 vocation of the church, we will be able to see this as an opportunity and not as a
2 problem. This will energize our identity as a church.
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5 **Summary**

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7 A missional/Anabaptist church is committed to its vocation of relevant presence and
8 ministry in the place and time into which God has placed us. God wants us to see the
9 potential for ecclesial renewal within our circumstances. Spiritual discernment is an
10 opportunity for spiritual renewal and growth.

11

12 Strengthening our capacity to discern together is a way of taking seriously our vocation
13 as God's people in this time and place. It is a way of engaging God's *kairos* (time) within
14 our *chronos* (time). This is a vocation to which the church has been permanently called.
15 This is one opportunity (among many) for our generation to demonstrate that the church
16 can "be worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (Eph. 4:1). It is our vocation
17 to be the church, and when we face this vocation squarely, God's Spirit will guide us and
18 "make peace" among us (Eph. 2:14). We cannot predict *how* God will do this work
19 among us, but we can be confident that he *will* do this work among us.

20

21 The heart and soul of facing the need for discernment is our conviction that the church is
22 worth the effort. In a sense, being more deliberate in strengthening this part of our
23 vocation may represent an opportunity of our generation to demonstrate the solid mettle
24 that is at the heart of our commitment to be a faithful Mennonite church in our time and
25 place.

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27 This document was commissioned and approved for discussion by the General Board of
28 Mennonite Church Canada.

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Mennonite Church Canada
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