

June 30, 2005

To the Congregations of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches,

On June 5-7, the Board of Faith and Life of the Canadian Conference met to reread Scripture, pray, and discern what God was saying to us regarding the issue of women in ministry leadership.

Although the General Conference has discussed this issue numerous times in the past two decades, it has most recently been brought to the Canadian Conference agenda by the Manitoba MB Conference. At the 2003 Manitoba MB Convention delegates affirmed a resolution by a 79% majority that would lift the current restriction on women being lead pastors. In March 2003, the national Board of Faith and Life was asked to bring this change in polity to the Canadian Conference.

Since that request the Board of Faith and Life, together with provincial conference leadership, conducted open invitation Study Conferences on Women in Ministry Leadership. These were held in Ontario (May 14-15, 2004), Saskatchewan (September 25, 2004), Alberta (October 14-15, 2004), Manitoba (October 30, 2004) and British Columbia (February 4-5, 2005). Summaries of the findings of these Study Conferences have been collated, and formed part of the material the Board of Faith and Life drew on in its June meetings.

The Board of Faith and Life has also taken seriously the statistical results and comments to statement #24 of the Canadian Conference Executive-sponsored *Strategic Planning Survey* that took place in December 2004 – January 2005. Every MB member and adherent in Canada had the opportunity to indicate “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “disagree”, “strongly disagree” or “no opinion” to statement #24 that read, “Qualified women should be permitted to fill any ministry role including that of senior pastor.” Of the 1,015 respondents, 274 people also supplied comments to support their answer.

After much prayer and study of Scripture, and a careful review of all Conference minutes, resolutions, letters to the Board of Faith and Life, surveys, summaries and conversations we have come to a resolution which we will bring to Gathering 2006 to be held in Calgary in July. We share this resolution with you for your information and feedback. We are not calling for a vote at this time, but do welcome your comments. The Board of Faith and Life will be meeting once more – January 25-26, 2006.

Any feedback you might wish to offer should go to David Wiebe at dwiebe@mbconf.ca or Walter Unger at walter.unger@telus.net no later than November 30, 2005. The resolution appears as an attachment to this letter.

We solicit your prayers as we seek to fulfill the mission God has given us as Canadian Mennonite Brethren, a mission for which we desire to empower all of our members, both men and women, to minister God’s grace.

Sincerely,

Walter Unger
Chair of the Board of Faith and Life

David Wiebe
Executive Director of the Canadian Conference

Attachment: Board of Faith and Life Women in Ministry Leadership Resolution (draft 4)

For more information see www.mbconf.ca/wiml

Strategic planning survey results

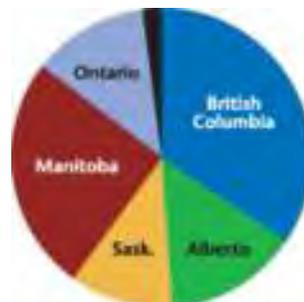
Mennonite Brethren are keenly interested in their denomination and want to be involved in planning its future. This was the finding of a survey conducted at the end of 2004 by the new executive board of the Canadian MB Conference.

77% of survey respondents said they were “enthusiastic about our denomination,” 82% said it is important for their church to be “part of the MB Conference,” and 72% said their church should support the Conference financially.

1015 people responded to the survey, which was open to all members and adherents of MB churches. It was available through churches and on the conference website, and was also mailed to a random sampling of 325 members from the *MB Herald* mailing list. Some 80 of this latter group replied.

Participation was fairly representative of MB population geographically. More males than females responded. Response was strong in all ages from 26 up, with the largest numbers in the 40 to 55 age range, and from those who have attended an MB church more than 20 years.

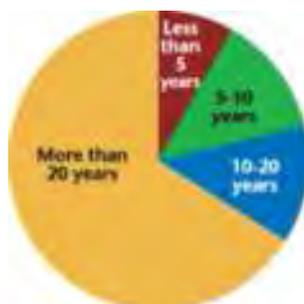
Percentage of respondents by geographical area



British Columbia	35.0
Alberta	13.3
Saskatchewan	12.6
Manitoba	25.6
Ontario	11.4
(Results combined on chart)	
Quebec	0.6
Newfoundland	0.3
New Brunswick	0.0
Nova Scotia	0.4
Prince Edward Island	0.0

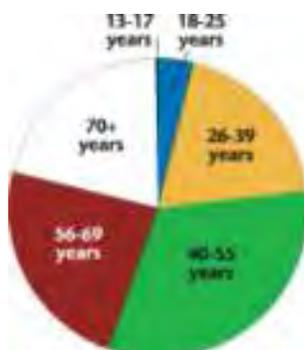
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Yukon	0.1
Nunavut	0.0
Northwest Territories	0.0
Outside Canada	0.8



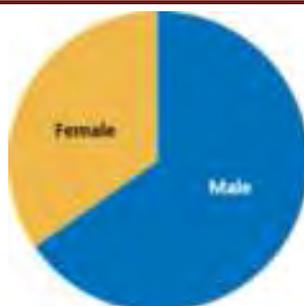
Percentage of respondents by length of attendance at an MB church

Less than 5 years	10.1
5-10 years	11.3
10-20 years	14.5
More than 20 years	64.0



Percentage of respondents by age group

13-17 years of age	0.3
18-25 years of age	5.0
26-39 years of age	17.3
40-55 years of age	34.1
56-69 years of age	23.4
70 plus years of age	20.0



Percentage of respondents by gender

Male	64.7
Female	35.3

The survey consisted of 31 questions, most of them statements to which respondents could choose one of five responses: strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. The questions ranged over the areas of ministry currently provided in the conference structure. The board wanted to hear the thoughts and feelings of Mennonite Brethren about these ministries, as well as other

concerns, in order to better plan for the future.

Analysis

Les Stahlke of GovernanceMatters Inc. compiled and analyzed the results, and presented them to the final Council of Boards meetings, and to the Executive Board and Board of Faith and Life meetings, held in Abbotsford Jan. 28–29.

The large number of responses and relatively even distribution of data over the demographic variables suggests the survey “reliably reflects the thoughts and feelings of the individuals of the MB Conference” regarding its content, he said. Furthermore, the “number, length and intensity” of the comments made in addition to marking a response suggests that people “embraced the survey and want to be involved in planning the future ministry at the Conference level.”

The comments add “rich colour and meaning to the assessment of the respondents to each statement,” said Stahlke. They were distilled and collated – about a quarter of them yielded more than 40 pages of tiny-print material that board members were urged to read and consider carefully.

Although there was diversity of opinion on some subjects, the survey also indicated a sense of unity within the Conference, said Stahlke. “The willingness to dialogue and share differences openly is a sign of a healthy church.”

In general

Several questions related to the Canadian Conference in general. As already stated, high commitment levels were expressed through the results. Survey respondents also strongly agreed that they are committed to “our Evangelical/Anabaptist distinctives.”

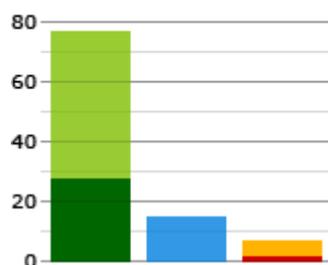
In ranking the four “foci” under which the Conference has organized its ministries, respondents chose “healthy churches” as their highest priority in terms of allocation of resources. Leadership development ranked second, reaching out third, and financial ministries last.

Enthusiasm for the Conference did not necessarily represent knowledge of denominational services, however. Only half of respondents agreed that they have “an adequate understanding of the programs and benefits of the Canadian Conference.”

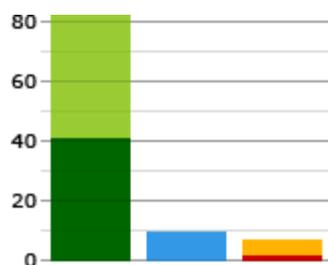
Note: Where percentages do not total 100, the difference represents those who did not answer the question.



I am enthusiastic about our denomination.

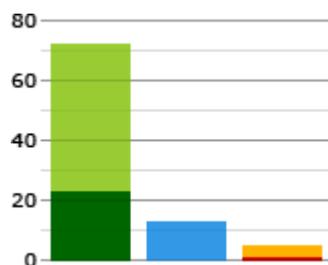


- 28% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 15% neither agree nor disagree
- 5% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree



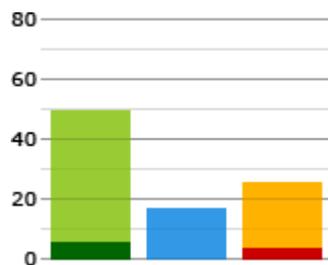
It is important to me for my church to be part of the Canadian Conference.

- 41% strongly agree
- 41% agree
- 10% neither agree nor disagree
- 5% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree



My church should support the Canadian Conference ministries financially.

- 23% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 13% neither agree nor disagree
- 4% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree



I have an adequate understanding of the programs and benefits that my church derives from the services of the Canadian Conference.

- 6% strongly agree
- 44% agree
- 17% neither agree nor disagree
- 22% disagree
- 4% strongly disagree



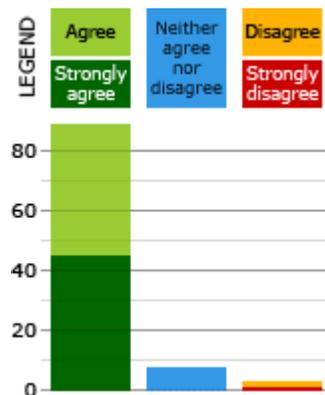
Please rank the following services (higher numbers indicate greater importance):

- 0.45 for financial ministries
- 2.10 for healthy churches
- 1.93 for leadership development
- 1.55 for reaching out

Confessional integrity

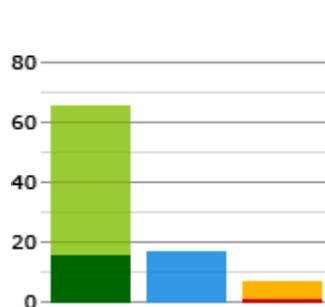
The service of “confessional integrity” offered by the Board of Faith and Life (BFL) was highly valued, expressed uniformly across all demographic variables. Close to 90% of respondents said they were “committed to our Evangelical/Anabaptist distinctives.”

In three questions about resources BFL provides (**study conferences, pamphlet series, the Confession of Faith**), close to 30% had no opinion on the value of study conferences, some 50% said the pamphlet series on doctrinal issues helped them “develop direction in theology and life practice” and more than 60% said the Confession of Faith helped them develop such direction. Stahlke suggested that the low assessment of the value of study conferences may reflect the low number of respondents able to attend such conferences.



I am committed to our Evangelical/Anabaptist distinctives.

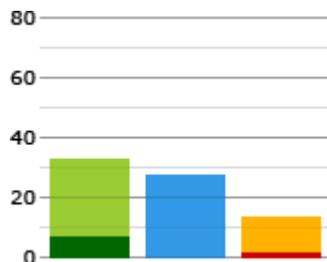
- 45% strongly agree
- 44% agree
- 8% neither agree nor disagree
- 2% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree



The Conference helps me develop direction in theology and life practice through the Confession of Faith.

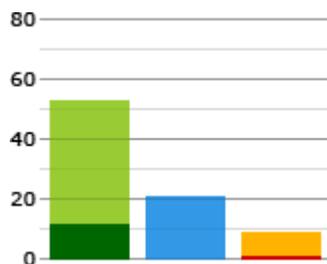
- 16% strongly agree
- 50% agree
- 17% neither agree nor disagree
- 6% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree

The Canadian Conference helps me develop direction in theology and life practice through the study conferences it facilitates.



- 7% strongly agree
- 26% agree
- 28% neither agree nor disagree
- 12% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree

The Conference helps me develop direction in theology and life practice through the publication of the pamphlet series on important doctrinal issues.



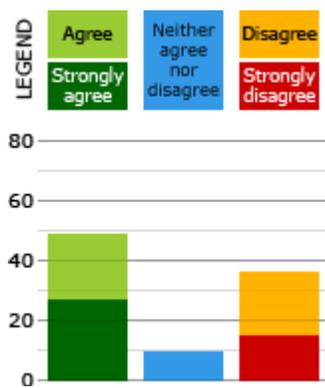
- 12% strongly agree
- 41% agree
- 21% neither agree nor disagree
- 8% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree

Women in leadership

The statement “Qualified women should be permitted to fill any ministry role, including that of senior pastor” was the one on which respondents were most divided and on which their opinions were held most strongly. Only 10% were ambivalent (neither agree nor disagree); 49% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement; 36% strongly disagreed or disagreed.

This question also indicated divergence by gender and age. Slightly more women than men agreed and more of them were ambivalent. Those ages 18–55 agreed at 58%, compared to 42% in the 56 and older group.

In his analysis, Stahlke noted the 16% spread in these age groups and commented that in 40 years the youngest people in the 18–55 age group will be the youngest in the 56 and over group. If the same spread of opinion continues, he said, the percentage favouring qualified women as senior pastors will rise to 74% in one generation.

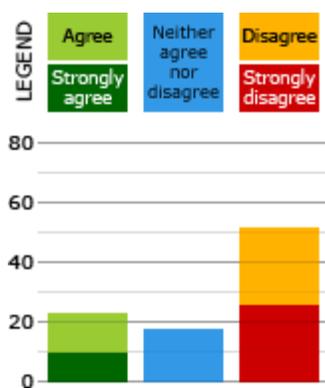


Qualified women should be permitted to fill any ministry role including that of senior pastor.

- 27% strongly agree
- 22% agree
- 10% neither agree nor disagree
- 21% disagree
- 15% strongly disagree

Our name

The statement that Mennonite Brethren should change their name so it “does not reflect ethnicity or gender” also revealed diversity in the demographic variables. Among respondents as a whole, 52% disagreed with the statement, with 23% agreeing and 18% ambivalent. Those respondents who are pastors (compared to members, attendees and elders/council leaders), however, agreed with the statement at 47% and disagreed with it at 23%.

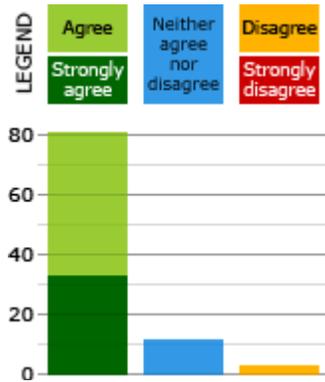


We should change the name of our Conference so that our name does not reflect ethnicity or gender.

- 10% strongly agree
- 13% agree
- 18% neither agree nor disagree
- 26% disagree
- 26% strongly disagree

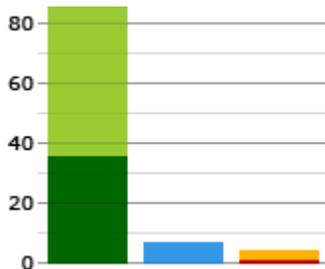
Ministry resources and historical work

Generally, respondents affirmed the value of resources and training provided by the Conference in ministry areas relating to adults, children and youth. More than 70% agreed that it is beneficial to their leaders to have access to these services. Even more (81%) said that the Conference should continue to produce Anabaptist/MB resource materials for the churches. Similar affirmation was given the work of maintaining historical information and understanding the past.



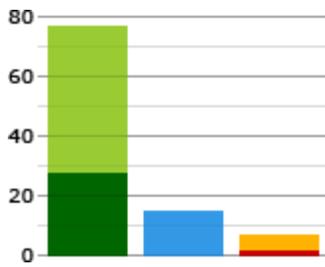
The Conference should continue to produce Anabaptist/MB resource materials for the churches.

- 33% strongly agree
- 48% agree
- 12% neither agree nor disagree
- 3% disagree
- 0% strongly disagree



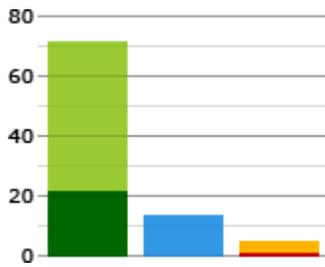
It is important for the Conference to maintain historical information about our church's activities to help the church understand its past and thus better plan for the future.

- 36% strongly agree
- 50% agree
- 7% neither agree nor disagree
- 3% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree



It is beneficial to our adult ministry leaders to have access to resources and training from the Adult Ministries programs of the Conference.

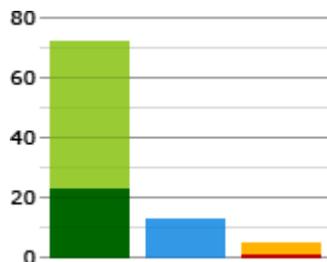
- 28% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 15% neither agree nor disagree
- 5% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree



It is beneficial to our children's ministry leaders to have access to resources and training from the Children's Ministries programs of the Conference.

- 22% strongly agree
- 50% agree
- 14% neither agree nor disagree
- 4% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree

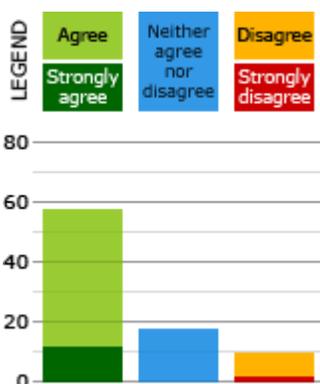
It is beneficial to our youth ministry leaders to have access to resources and training from the Youth Ministries programs of the Conference.



- 23% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 13% neither agree nor disagree
- 4% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree

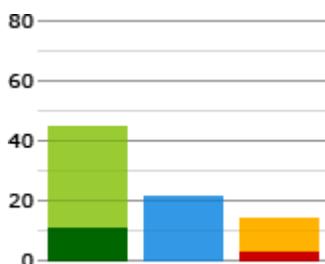
Leadership development

Four survey statements dealt with leadership development. All of them related to programs of **Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary** (MBBS), which is one of the “strategic partnerships” the Canadian Conference shares with U.S. Mennonite Brethren. The positive responses here were somewhat lower than other parts of the survey: 58% agreed “the **Leadership Training Matching Grant** is a useful program to encourage leaders to move into ministry” and that MBBS “produces effective pastors to lead and serve in our churches.” Fewer (45%) agreed it “adequately serves the region of Canada in which I live.”



MBBS produces effective pastors to lead and serve in our churches.

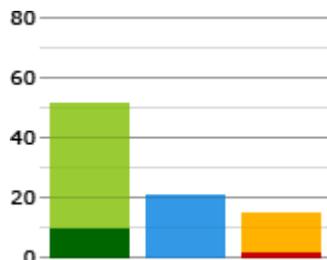
- 12% strongly agree
- 46% agree
- 18% neither agree nor disagree
- 8% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree



MBBS adequately serves the region of Canada in which I live.

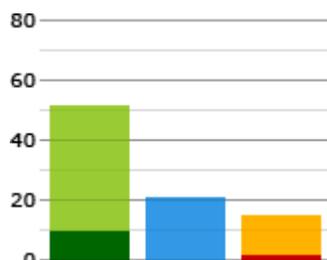
- 11% strongly agree
- 34% agree
- 22% neither agree nor disagree
- 11% disagree
- 3% strongly disagree

MBBS is effective as a spiritual and academic resource to assist the church in responding biblically to pertinent theological, social and church issues.



- 10% strongly agree
- 42% agree
- 21% neither agree nor disagree
- 13% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree

The Leadership Training Matching Grant Program is a useful program to encourage leaders to move into ministry.



- 10% strongly agree
- 42% agree
- 21% neither agree nor disagree
- 13% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree

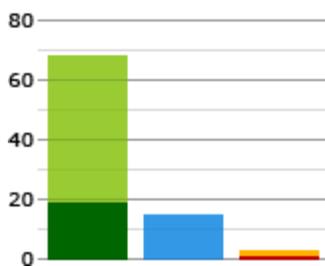
Reaching out

For reasons of timing and other circumstances in preparing the survey, **Mennonite Brethren Mission and Service International** (MBMSI), the other “strategic partnership” the Canadian Mennonite Brethren share with their U.S. counterpart, was not included in the survey. Some people, Stahlke commented, may have considered it “obliquely” in their response to the statement “The Canadian Conference provides effective means for my church to be involved in serving people and places beyond my local congregation,” to which 60% agreed.

There was solid recognition (68%) of the benefits of promoting evangelism in the cities of Calgary, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver through the **Key Cities Initiative**. When it came to whether the Canadian Conference is helping the respondent’s own church “make a significant impact in our community,” only 20% agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 36% who were ambivalent on the statement and 31% who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

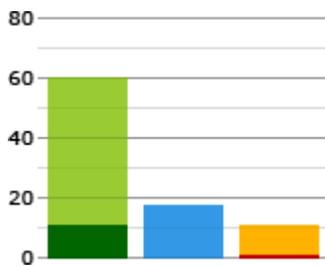


The Key Cities Initiative, which has focussed on planting churches in Calgary, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, is beneficial for promoting evangelism in those cities.



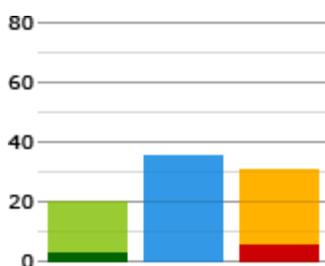
- 19% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 15% neither agree nor disagree
- 2% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree

The Canadian Conference provides effective means for my church to be involved in serving people and places beyond my local congregation.



- 11% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 18% neither agree nor disagree
- 10% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree

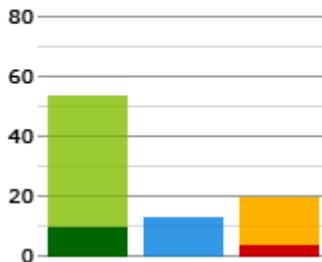
The Canadian Conference is helping my church to make a significant impact in our community.



- 3% strongly agree
- 17% agree
- 36% neither agree nor disagree
- 25% disagree
- 6% strongly disagree

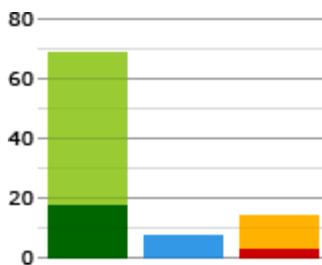
Finances

Awareness of the **financial services** the Conference provides to constituents in addition to its role within the infrastructure of conference work – services such as savings accounts, RRSP, student saving accounts, and loans for churches – came in at medium levels (54%). There was higher awareness of will preparation services offered (69%). In his analysis, Les Stahlke suggested this level of understanding may suggest “there are not enough resources allocated to this service to make the members and churches aware of the potential benefits.” This service was only recently identified as a 4th “focus” of the Conference, he said.



The Conference operates in part as a financial institution with savings accounts, RRSP, Student Savings Accounts, and loans for churches. I understand the banking services the Canadian Conference offers.

- 10% strongly agree
- 44% agree
- 13% neither agree nor disagree
- 16% disagree
- 4% strongly disagree



I have an adequate understanding of the will preparation services offered by the Canadian Conference.

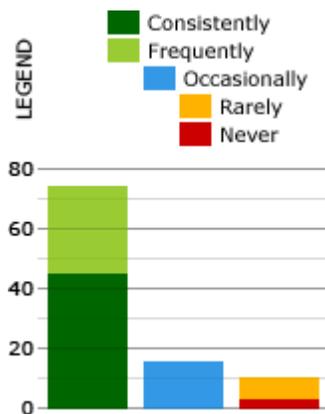
- 18% strongly agree
- 51% agree
- 8% neither agree nor disagree
- 11% disagree
- 3% strongly disagree

Building community

Six questions addressed areas of communication or “community building” such as the Conference periodicals, website and biennial conventions. 74% said they read one of the four Conference publications (*MB Herald*, *MB Chinese Herald*, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, *Le Lien*) either “consistently” (45%) or “frequently” (29%); 16% said they read one of the magazines “occasionally”; 10% read one rarely or never. The *MB Herald* was indicated most often as the periodical read. (96.8% of respondents indicated English as their preferred language and the survey was not translated into Chinese, French and German.) The effectiveness of the **website** was rated positively at 38%, with a large number marking ambivalence or not responding; this may reflect the relative newness of the medium as a site of Conference information.

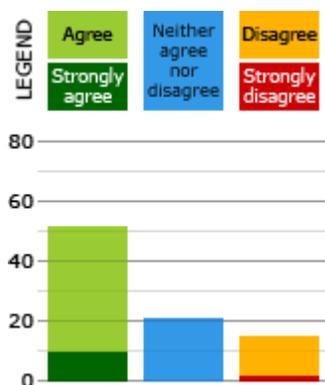
About half of respondents (52%) felt the biennial conventions are an effective method of “communicating with the churches about shared ministry,” 64% agreed they are “an effective method of celebrating together and building community,” and 55% agreed they are “an effective method of conducting the business of the Conference.”

Less than half (41%) agreed that “Acting on behalf of our churches, the Canadian Conference is relating to the wider Christian community appropriately.”



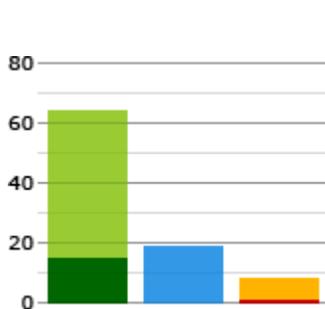
The Conference publishes a variety of magazines. I read at least one of these magazines.

- 45% consistently
- 29% frequently
- 16% occasionally
- 7% rarely
- 3% never



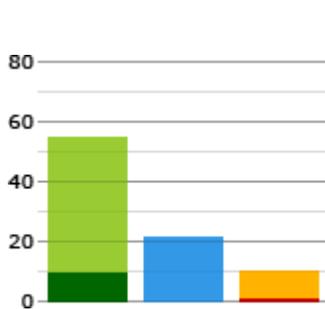
The biennial conventions are an effective method of communicating with the churches about shared ministry.

- 10% strongly agree
- 42% agree
- 21% neither agree nor disagree
- 13% disagree
- 2% strongly disagree



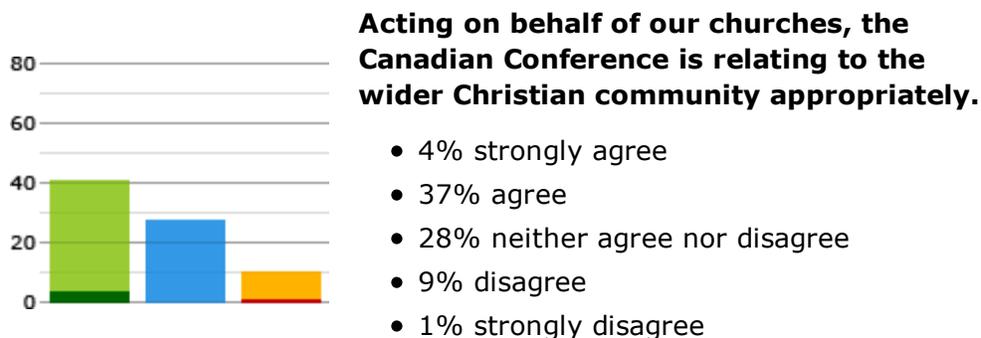
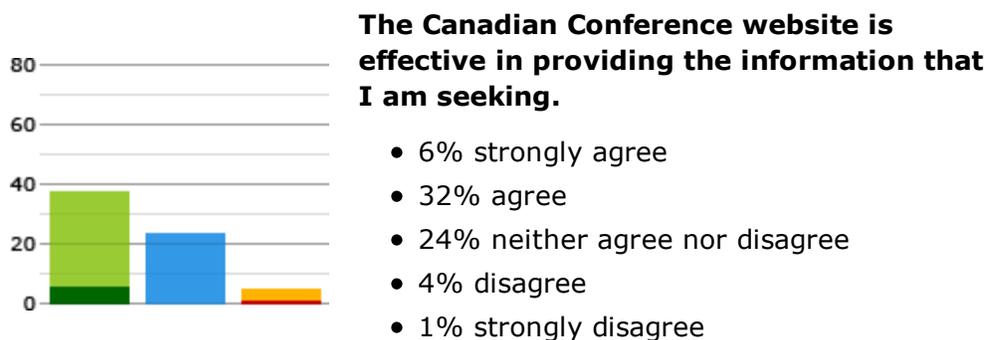
The biennial conventions are an effective method of celebrating together and building community.

- 15% strongly agree
- 49% agree
- 19% neither agree nor disagree
- 7% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree



The biennial conventions are an effective method of conducting the business of the Conference.

- 10% strongly agree
- 45% agree
- 22% neither agree nor disagree
- 9% disagree
- 1% strongly disagree



Conclusions

The Executive Board elected at Gathering 2004 met for the first time in October to review and discuss a first draft of the strategic planning survey. It was hoped that the survey could be completed and analyzed in time for the transition from the Council of Boards model to the new governance model in January.

This meant the survey was prepared fairly quickly and that people were asked to respond to it during the busy Christmas season. Similarly, production schedules meant that plans to carry the survey in the periodicals, including translating it for the French, German and Chinese papers, were not realized.

In spite of these limitations in the survey, the Executive Board has been encouraged by the responses and grateful for the keen response and the many helpful comments and critiques. The Board did some initial evaluation of the results at their January meeting and meets again in April.

After more opportunity to consider the results and digest the comments, it intends to develop a strategic plan for Conference ministry. Executive director David Wiebe says the Board will continue to use surveys and other ways of listening in the future, both to hone in on feedback on specific areas of service, or to track results where

changes have been made.

—*Dora Dueck, from reports*

Index details

Category: Canadian MB Conference

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Masthead and usage information

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The Canadian Conference of
Mennonite Brethren Churches 

**Board of Faith and Life resolution on
Women in Ministry Leadership
June 2005**

Since our inception, the Mennonite Brethren have sought to fulfill the mission in which God has led us (John 17:17-19; 20:21-23).

We believe our Lord is creating a people of His own choosing, to accomplish His mission in the world (2 Peter 2:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:17). He has invited us to work with Him in this most urgent mission (2 Corinthians 5:18-21; 1 Peter 4:7-11). We are committed to becoming increasingly effective missional people. By the Holy Spirit's gifting and empowerment, (1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Acts 1:8; 2:1-47), we invite people everywhere to become followers of Christ (Matthew 28:19).

We believe that the Holy Spirit grants gifts to all believers irrespective of gender for diverse ministries both in the church and in the world (2 Cor. 3:4-6). Both men and women minister God's grace (Galatians 3:28; Romans 16:1-20; Philippians 4:1-3).

We believe that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16,17), including those passages historically interpreted to imply a restriction to women's participation in the life, ministry and mission of the church for all time (1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 1 Corinthians 14:26-35, 1 Timothy 2:1-15).

We understand the role of these restrictive texts in the context of removing barriers to furthering God's mission in the world. Some New Testament churches in Corinth and Ephesus had their missional effectiveness threatened by false doctrine (Acts 20:29,30), inappropriate behaviour (1 Timothy 2:1-15; 2 Timothy 3:6-7), a lack of order in public worship (1 Corinthians 14:22-35) and a lack of mutual submission and respect in marriage, the home, and the church (Ephesians 5:21-6:9). These issues remain a concern today. Whereas Paul addressed those people and issues that seriously hindered the advance of the gospel, we too share his sincere desire for an unhindered proclamation of the gospel (Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 3:1-12).

It is Christ Himself who provides the gifts of leadership to the church (Ephesians 4:11-16). Therefore, we recommend that our churches receive all our Lord's gifts and be free to discern men and women for leadership roles to which the congregation calls them and to which they are called, gifted and affirmed, including the position of lead pastor. Our desire is to empower all our members, thus moving forward the mission of God to proclaim to the world "the boundless riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8).

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Ecclesiological Aspects for the Women In Ministry Leadership Discussion Board of Faith and Life – June 2005

The following text is the script read and verbally expanded upon by Menno Martens, BFL representative from Saskatchewan, and David Wiebe, Executive Director of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches, at the June 2005 retreat of the Board of Faith and Life.

It is available at the Mennonite Brethren Conference website: www.mbconf.ca

Italics are by Menno Martens, regular text by David Wiebe.

Introduction by Menno Martens:

Definition: Ecclesiology is the study of the “history and theology of the Christian Church.”

The Significance of Historical and Cultural Considerations in the Current Debate: J.M. Holmes (referred to by Doug Heidebrecht in Direction, Fall, 2004) says, “Later 20th century literature on 1 Timothy 2:9-15 displays little evidence of hope that the text itself has anything new to offer...The general impression given is that it must be the historical background or the hermeneutic of the interpreter that unlocks the remaining enigmas.”

Our Assignment: To illustrate how Scripture itself and the exegesis of Scripture have played themselves out in church history, with particular attention to polity matters emanating from beliefs about the role of women. Where do Scripture and practice consistently run in tandem and where to they diverge? What significance do we want to attach to Scriptural passages that in the past or present have been interpreted in opposite ways by eminent scholars? How high on the scale of important doctrines do we place our theology about the role of women? What is the essential message of God to humankind, and how does our understanding of our commission influence our attitude towards gender differences?

Let’s start with the last question. Dave, what is your understanding of God’s intentions for men and women in the church body?

Gifting for Missional Leadership

Dave: The argument and much of the detail in my comments comes from John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics*, Herald Press, 1992.

The NT depicts the church composed of radical followers of Christ and an emerging community working to build kingdom values and character. The original leaders are the immediate followers of Christ, but as the church grows, this circle quickly spreads out to include those who have been introduced to Jesus Christ through the gospel preached.

The character of the church – and that of leadership – is based on the gifting of all believers by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2: Pentecost: The coming of the Holy Spirit showed that God would indwell each believer. As such, each believer is also a messenger – illustrated in the fact that “each one heard the evangel in his own language”.

1 Cor 12:7 “every member is the bearer of the “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Ephesians 4:11-13 “His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,...for building up the body of Christ...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Compare to Romans 12:3 where “grace has been given according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

1 Peter 4:10 “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

In short, everyone has a spiritual gift, and all gifts are required to fulfill the mission of the church.

Menno: Dave, you seem to point to an egalitarian approach to roles in the church body. You use expressions like ‘each one’, ‘everyone’, ‘every believer’, and ‘all.’ Are you convinced that God is essentially more concerned about getting his work done than about the gender of who does it?

Dave: In general yes. We’re living in a missional context in Canada. This is something that will be paramount for the thriving of our church. A quote from Bill Hybels, Willow Creek (Defining Moments Series):

“We chase competent women out of the church by relegating them to roles that are beneath their giftedness, vision character or maturity. I think that male leaders will stand accountable before God some day for that. It’s a blind spot in the minds and hearts of church leaders in many places. I don’t want to get too looney about this, but if I were the evil one, and I could find a way to deny the church of 50% of its horsepower, and relegate that half to the sidelines, it’s a strategically smart move. It’s important to realize there’s a cosmic war going on, and that ought to put us on a high alert status to do our homework to question tradition on this one, and see if maybe there hasn’t been confusion in the past that better scholarship has been able to clear up today to get all on the playing field, doing what they should be doing.”

Menno: It seems to me that Paul had certain rules for certain churches that he founded but not the same rules for all of them. In the article “A Tale of Two Cultures” (James R. Payton Jr. Priscilla Papers, Winter 2002: 16:1) we are told that he had different advice for Greek churches than for Roman churches. The one overarching rule he had for himself was to do whatever it took in order to save some. Never mind if that meant being like the Greeks in one instance and like the Romans in another. “I do all this for the sake of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Maybe we, like Paul, should concentrate on removing all impediments to the proclamation of the gospel rather than adopting limitations and prohibitions. As Paul said in another text, we are in a race to the finish line and we lay aside anything that might prevent us from getting the prize (Philippians 3:14 and Hebrews 12:1). Even in 1 Timothy 2, Paul prefaces his instructions to women by pronouncing, “God...wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

When giving lifestyle advice, he states his reason as being that “no one will malign the word of God.” Obviously he is sensitive to the ambient culture. Likewise we may be “maligned” for being unnecessarily narrow at a time when the culture values inclusiveness. To top it all off, Paul in his writings commends women in leadership, a fact that underlines the conclusion we have already formed that gender roles were not all that significant as far as he was concerned.

Menno (For group discussion): Supposing we examine a hypothesis that the message is more important than the messenger. Do we have any Scriptural support for that hypothesis?

Menno (suggested answers):

- a) *The first proclaimer, preacher, of the resurrection event was a woman*
- b) *The great commission “Go ye” is not gender specific*
- c) *“The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork.” Psalm 19:1. Apparently even nature preaches. The message is so strong that ‘men are without excuse.’ Romans 1.20*
- d) *Even stones can preach. Jesus said, “If they (the disciples) keep quiet the stones will cry out” Luke 19.40*

Dave, from the discussion of giftedness in Ephesians 4, you get the impression that the work of the church requires teamwork. Does the scripture tell us who the team leaders are? Do we correctly infer that team leaders have to be men, or can they be both men and women?

Leadership/Relativizing the Specialist

Dave: I believe Paul had a vision for a new leadership paradigm in the church: he saw the need for a team of spiritual gifts, not just one – meaning the gift of leadership. The five gifts of Ephesians 4 (some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers) are an example of a set of leadership gifts necessary for the development of a numerically growing, character-maturing body of believers that were unified yet diverse, structured yet adaptable to incorporate new believers.

In effect, Paul and the Bible affirm a structure analogous to the human organism. We have leaders, but they have to operate within a cooperative environment designed to build up the people for the mission. Leadership is critical but it is consistently contextualized within the larger cooperative environment. The church needs leaders, but it also needs every gift in appropriate deployment. I think team leaders can be both men and women.

Menno: *Dave, in the OT We learn that only Levites could be priests: moreover, only Levite men could be priests. Our Anabaptist forebears made a point of stressing the priesthood of all believers. If all Christians are priests, can all Christians do what priests traditionally did, namely lead in religious worship in its various forms? On the other hand, is it misleading to call Christians priests since there is no valid link between OT priesthood and NT believers?*

Dave: The work of Pierre Gilbert (*Spiritual Warfare and the Third Wave Movement: A Critique, Direction Journal, Fall 2000: 29:2*) on understanding the ancient mind is helpful. In the New Testament, the mystery religions were prevalent. In essence these religions followed the powerful paradigm of the ancient Mesopotamian worldview. This worldview said that it took a special person with mysterious insights into the “unseen realms” to know what the capricious gods were thinking. The priest or shaman was a ‘professional’ purveyor of access to the divine, and held a monopoly of those very special goods which people need to address life situations. The specialist alone knows and administers the ceremonies for the people, and these ceremonies are the only way to please the gods and assure fertility or success in life or war.

God has been working to counter this kind of thinking from the creation account on, and acted at various points to relativize the centrality of the priestly specialist. Abraham was not a priest; he took his sacrifice to Melchizedek (Genesis 14; Hebrews 7). Moses was not a priest; he let his brother Aaron and then the Levites do the rituals. He even called out 70 men to share the spirit’s empowerment (Numbers 11) and when Joshua objected to a couple of them prophesying “out of control” Moses said, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets” (Num 11:29).

Jesus relativized the temple priesthood. He formed a movement out of fishermen, zealots, and publicans sending 70 of them out to ‘tell them the Kingdom of God is near’ (Luke 10). With his death and resurrection, it becomes clear that Jesus was the last sacrifice and thus the last priest (Hebrews 7-10). Practically, with the religious specialists and ruling authorities, many bad models of leadership prompted Jesus to say “Don’t be like the Gentiles who lord it over you.”

And following Jesus, Paul was instructing the church in Ephesus regarding its status and function against the worldview that elevated religious leaders to a specialized class of people with unique insights into the spiritual realms. Fundamentally, he was telling all believers that, being seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 1:3), they were given power to participate in salvation (Ephesians 2:8-10) and that leadership was going to be distributed among a variety of gifted people/gifts to the church (Ephesians 4:11).

We should note, historically, that even the church has been tempted to elevate its pastoral (priestly) leaders to a special status. The last time this was radically challenged was in the 1500s in the

Anabaptist movement. At that time the priestly class of the Catholic church was also inextricably linked to the government class, with all the accompanying temptations of and capitulations to secular power.

Every time we lose sight of the Pauline vision for the priesthood of all believers, and team leadership of the church, we institutionalize a certain type of hierarchical order. These days we attach power and class to the senior pastor (and to some degree to the paid pastor of various assignments). We see this in evangelicalism's 'answer' to the mainline church priest – that the senior pastor in independent evangelical churches is in many ways the 'owner' of the church. That we are influenced by the independent evangelical church movement is undeniable.

The result is that, for example, binding and loosing – taught by Jesus as every disciple's responsibility within a prescribed progression (Matthew 18) – defaults to become the responsibility of a priestly class. Penance and forgiveness has been removed from "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" or "you who are spiritual should restore the sinner" (Galatians 6:1-2). Instead it has gone to the specialist – the pastor is counsellor and source of discipline. (Fortunately, church discipline is still shared within an elder or deacon body in the MB context).

And breaking bread together – the Lord's Supper and love feast – left the tables of the saints and became a ritualized institution administered only by the specialists. In many evangelical circles, these specialists – even for serving communion – are male.

All this to say, we have elevated the senior pastoral role to a status Paul would not have visualized. He had a different vision for church leadership that was to be shaped by the then-new idea of the priesthood of all believers.

Menno: Dave, our contemporary society stresses egalitarianism and equal rights like no other society that ever was. When the church institutes service limitations based on gender, is the church getting its enlightenment from the society or from the Scriptures?

Why Biblical Egalitarianism is not "Equal Rights"

Dave: Partly due to Constantine, and on through the middle ages, the church gave away its core definition of baptism, which originally simply united everyone at 'the foot of the cross'. In fact, one of the core messages of baptism is indeed that all are equal in Christ. First of all, we're equal in death (Romans 6) which means "rights" are relinquished to the lordship of Christ, identity is lost in the identity of Christ, and roles are completely up to Christ's wise assignment as he gifts believers.

Further, in Galatians, the status of individuals – Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female – is predicated on the equality driven by "all of you who were baptised into Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Now, when the church aligned itself with the secular political powers, it needed to align baptism with power politics (infant baptism automatically designated people as members of the state as well). The results were reinforced ethnicities, those 'in' and those 'out'.

Unfortunately modern egalitarianism did not come from the church – though it originally did, and should have through time. Egalitarianism came mostly from Enlightenment humanism because it could no longer come from the missionary meaning of baptism, which was lost. This left egalitarianism open to human mis-application. A case in point: The founding fathers of America said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." They meant 'all land-owning white men – excluding women, black men, native American men, and poor men.'

Today, when the church talks about egalitarianism (especially related to women and men) it looks as if we are merely tagging along behind the world, trying to use words of our own to say something that the world taught us. To our chagrin Christians have claimed on the grounds of creation and providence that peoples, nations and classes should stay apart, that men should rule over women, and that Europeans should rule the globe.

This only reinforces the importance of clarifying that the New Testament has its own grounds for its own egalitarian witness, differently shaped from that of the Enlightenment, older and more deeply rooted, even though it has been lost and betrayed for centuries.

Philippians 2 says that Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be clung to, but emptied himself. The biblical vision of radical subordination – Jesus’ model – shows that grasping for power is not the way of the follower of Christ. That applies to both those in power – in this case, men – and those hoping to gain access – in this case, women. This renders the women in church leadership discussion difficult, since personal motivations must be examined in each case, not as a sweeping generalization.

Menno: Dave people are so afraid of having the church ally itself with the ‘women’s lib movement’. Removing all barriers for women in church ministry is ‘women’s lib’ is it not?

Dave: Liberation ideas tend to see the ideal as a “flipping” of the power hierarchy. The disadvantaged will one day mount to the top and lord it over those now in power. The objectives of the liberation movement and of Christian women have to be entirely different. The first is an attempt to seize power; the second is a commitment to sacrificial service.

Biblically, there is a third way: the prophetic. While the prophets warned the rich about their abuses, their message was that all would come under judgement, especially the rich and wicked, and that the poor would ‘get what they need’ not necessarily power. Isaiah 55-61 outlines this in various ways: ‘let the wicked forsake his way’ (Is 55:7); ‘the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free...’ (Is 58:6)

Ultimately, the corrections (invasions and later, exile) were designed to “make [Israel] a light to the Gentiles, that [they] may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6).

So removing barriers is not about ‘women’s lib’ but about a) redressing a fundamental element of oppression in attitudes in men about women, and b) making it possible to be a brighter light to the world. We need to remember that wherever Christianity has flourished, women have indeed been released from oppressive mores, generally.

Menno: How would you summarize all this?

Dave: We are trying to determine whether women can serve in a role called “senior pastor.” The mistake that dominates this debate, from the perspective of the Pauline vision, is not in the answer but in the question. There is not one ‘ministerial’ role, of which then we could argue about whether it is gender specific. There are as many ministerial roles as there are members of the body of Christ, and that means that more than half of them belong to women.

The role least justified by the witness of the New Testament is that of priest – quite regardless of the gender debate – precisely the one that some men have traditionally held alone and want to keep for themselves. To let a few women into an office that men have for generations restricted and that did not even exist in the apostolic churches may be a good kind of ‘affirmative action,’ but it is hardly the most profound vision of renewal or of the mission of the church. Why debate about feminine access to a patriarchally defined ministry? That’s like trying to say Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher, or Indira Gandhi transformed the nature of power politics.

The transformation that Paul’s vision calls for would not be to let a few more especially gifted women share with a few men the rare roles of domination; it would be to reorient the whole notion of ministry leadership into a team of elders so that there would be no one ungifted, no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated.

In our setting, to say that women can be elders but not senior pastors doesn’t make sense if the leadership of the church is a team of people fulfilling, for example the gift list of Ephesians 4. However, to say that women might not be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers is literally unbiblical, because the NT names women in those giftings/activities. Thus we need to achieve a new consistency.

Menno:

Dave, the great ecclesiastical debate about women focuses entirely on leadership issues, the struggle centering on Paul's letters to the Galatians, Corinthians and Timothy. Our traditions as Mennonites come out of the Reformation. We accepted as true that Scripture is plain enough that even people who are not scholars can understand it. Scriptures should be taken literally unless there are very good grounds to explain them as figurative.

Why then do we not obey the Scriptures when they tell us that women should cover their heads when they pray (1 Corinthians 11:14)? Women's beauty "should not come from outer adornment such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewellery and fine clothes" (1 Peter 3:3). "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Peter 5:14). "You also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14). We obey none of the foregoing commands. Why not? We dismiss them as unimportant, not relevant or having cultural significance for the times in which they were spoken. When Paul says that he would not have a woman teaching a man (1 Timothy 2:12), even the most dedicated literalists have difficulty, for they have to decide whether a woman can teach a Sunday School class with males in it. If she can teach male children, at what age is the male when she can no longer teach him?

The question that comes out of all these examples of unkept commands is why we single out the passages dealing with women in leadership to the exclusion of a host of others. Are the church's critics being cynical when they suggest that our zeal in one area alone has more to do with the historic male domination with which we have been much influenced, than with dedication to Biblical faithfulness? Bear in mind that the Mennonite Brethren brought from Europe "a strong conservatism that clearly defined the subservience of women in the role of the church." Also in fundamentalism there was the belief that "transcultural principles (were) for all times and places."

MB History faces us with the fact that we have visited the issue of women in ministry leadership many times:

In 1879 we ruled that women should not preach nor take part in discussion in business meetings.

In 1927 we decided that "the cutting of hair is in direct contradiction with the Word of God."

In 1957 we were troubled by our double standard when it came to missionary service by women. We said that women should be commissioned rather than ordained.

In 1975 we said that women could not be ordained to the ministry nor could they serve in such boards as the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns, the Board of Reference and Counsel or its equivalent.

In 1981 we said that "we do not hold that the passages in the New Testament which put restrictions on the Christian woman have become irrelevant, even though they were given in a different cultural context, and therefore, do need to be re-applied." We affirmed that women should not be ordained to pastoral leadership but could accept other responsibilities.

In 1987, after debate and an amendment we concluded that the guidelines of 1981 remain in effect.

In 1993 we offered much encouragement to women but also said "the 1981 resolution regarding ordination of women remains in effect."

Dave, have we been wrong for 145 years (as Mennonite Brethren) and are finally seeing the light?

Some Cross Cultural MB Examples

Dave: Well, it's possible. It took a long time for the church to properly address the slavery issue. We're in a somewhat longer trajectory.

A sister church – the MB church of the Congo – took 2 years to study this matter and determined it should allow sisters to pastor their churches. In part this is the result of the "mama theologians" who have emerged from the economic devastation in that country – indeed all over Africa. These women come together to study the Bible and to work on ways to earn money through micro-enterprises. This emerging movement shows many women prepared and qualified for church leadership. Nevertheless, conference leadership in the Congo MB Conference is restricted to men. The reasons for this are not entirely clear,

and may not be expressly biblical, since a certain amount of power and financial advantage seems to be attached to this position.

The emerging self-identity of the Mennonite Brethren Congolese Church as leader is further illustrated by a recommendation arising from the seminars organized for Congo-North American dialogue during a visit to the Mennonite Brethren headquarters in Kikwit in 2003. At this meeting, a recommendation was passed by the delegates as follows: “We thank the church of the Democratic Republic of Congo for having accepted the ordination of female pastors. In light of this decision, we propose that the Church of America and of Canada follow this example” (July 7, 2003, Kikwit).

The Ethiopian Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), planted by Eastern Mennonite Missions went underground in 1974 with 5000 members. 20 years later they emerged with 50,000. The church had become cell/house based, and was led by women, since the male leadership had been either driven underground or eliminated. Today they number almost 250,000 (121,000 members) and are, incidentally, debating about whether women should lead the church!

This leads to several thoughts:

If our environment were to become hostile, and the only leaders left to us would be women, would everything change? If so, to what degree should that influence our position on women serving in leadership roles now?

To what degree has our expediency already been evident? We once ordained women to missionary church leadership, honouring and commissioning them to fulfill the role of apostle and church leader to another distant country.

Are we aware of a double standard in our practice? People in ‘mission’ countries notice how women missionaries are not given the same status here in Canada upon their return. They aptly point out that we have a double standard – one that betrays paternalism, perhaps even imperialism, which cannot be biblical or honouring to the Lord. Further, if the Congo MBs challenge us to consider what they have accomplished, should we not take them seriously? What does it say about our ecclesiology in our current global village if we choose to ignore them?

And lastly, the ‘light’ we may be seeing after 145 years of existence as Mennonite Brethren may simply be the shaking of Enlightenment foundations as a guiding paradigm or worldview. The Enlightenment certainly led us to some great insight on the scientific sphere, but as a fundamentally humanistic worldview it also has negatively affected our theology and practice. We’re only now discovering where we were steered wrong. So we shouldn’t be surprised if we discover where we were ‘boxed in’ and uncover new frameworks of God’s revelation – which of course is in his timeless Word, under our noses all this time.

Menno: Do you have suggestions for the MB Conference as a practical result of this?

Suggestions for the MB Conference

Dave:

1. Review our Leadership philosophy

I think we should assess the level to which we have elevated the “senior pastor” function. In the past we held a much more community oriented leadership structure. It effectively began its end when we started hiring pastors for pay. This was not wrong necessarily.

However, we got caught in a paradigm that held too individualistic a view of the pastor. The pastor has had to be “all things” and pastors either burn out in some way, or they manage to be so stellar that they can almost do all of the Ephesians 4 five-fold gift set. Theologically, it isn’t logical that all 5 gifts are extant in any one individual – God would never set it up that way. But where they are missing, we’ve been willing to leave that dormant, or unfilled. And our churches lose power to achieve the “fullness of Christ” goal as a result.

Another consequence has been the essential deification of a pastor. They must be really special to do everything they are called to do as the individual in charge of the church. We put the pastor on the pedestal instead of the lord, Jesus Christ. And the pastor gravitates to power.

We can return to a more biblical paradigm even if we call a full time pastor into our church leadership. We must begin with a commitment to a team leadership concept. This is being demonstrated in some of our churches very effectively. The Ephesians 4 gift list is our template.

Within the team leadership concept we can discern within the body whether or not we have the gifts we need to meet the demands of the mission before us. We can determine who is the leader called to give direction and pay him or her full time wages to perform that function. There will be more time available to that person “for the ministry of the word and for prayer” (Acts 6) to lead the way of listening to God and discerning the directions for the church in mission.

As a church grows, there will be administrative leadership required, so clearly more staff will be hired. But always, the leadership team will need to be composed of the Ephesians 4 gifts.

One of our churches is deliberately positioned this way. They have 5 people on salaried staff. They are a team and no one receives more salary than the others. However, one pastor, who is gifted with apostolic leadership, is assigned as the one who meets the board every time to present the “collective wisdom” of the team and relay information from the board to them. There is no “senior pastor” as such. Conceivably any one of the pastoral team could be a woman, and a woman could represent the team to the board – even under our present policy.

2. Review how we view people and issues

In some sense there is no such thing as a ‘women in ministry leadership issue.’ This is because it doesn’t make sense to talk about women in leadership in an abstract way. The way that the church has originally understood gifts in ministry is really contingent upon people and what they bring to leadership. The role of the church is to discern people and what they can offer. It’s problematic to set up a structure or criteria prior to actually discussing with specific individuals who may or may not be suitable for leadership in a specific local setting.

The church needs to discuss its needs and potential for ministry, and then determine who has gifts to step up to meet those needs. It should have nothing to do with gender, race, etc.

Rowan Williams (*Christ on Trial*) says it’s problematic at least, and blasphemous at worst to develop a procedure and theology that is constituted by exclusion, if the Bible offers the possibility of inclusion. It’s fundamentally anti-gospel. If Jesus is lord over all, then you can’t say that certain groups of people are automatically excluded. By Jesus’ own example, women ought to be included – and of course they are in the church community.

The problem is, as regards women in ministry leadership, the *procedure or rule* tends to come prior to the *discussion*, and they are often automatically excluded before we start. The key is to recognize the essential equality of all Christians, the gifting of all through the Holy Spirit, and the fundamental community we live in. In this regard, we should be able to put a woman and/or a man up for positions of leadership, and determine if an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher is needed and who can fill the bill best according to the mission and need.

3. Don’t equate the women in ministry leadership ‘issue’ with the admission of homosexuals to membership ‘issue’.

Some have said there is a slippery slope between these two issues. I don’t believe this to be the case if we’re clear about the reasons for the shift regarding women in ministry leadership. The shift in interpretation is not about equal rights. Nor is it about relegating the restrictions (and therefore many other biblical injunctions) to the local or temporal context – this discussion is much more complex than that, as should be apparent in the prior discussion. William Webb in “*Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*” (IVP) provides clear criteria for assessing the two issues separately.

4. Connect our policy more strongly to mission.

The prohibitions concerning women in the New Testament must be taken seriously. However, the prohibitions are contextual in a missional way. This is something missed almost entirely in the arguments on this subject. The prohibitions – and pretty much everything else Paul writes – is aimed at assisting the

church in mission. From that, we must learn how to look at our contexts as churches, determine the leadership needs for meeting the challenge before us, and then act freely to determine who (what gifts) we have in the community/congregation to lead out to address those needs.

It is easy to forget that the church is God's vehicle for introducing and acting as his kingdom presence in the world. As such, the church has a mission. It's members and leaders must contextualize themselves within that framework.

We derive this from the New Testament itself. The church is described as struggling to find its way as it introduces the Gospel to the nations. The many discussions in the letters are instructions to church bodies and leaders to help them figure out how to solve problems and position themselves appropriately to meet the challenges every missionary and mission church faces.

We recognize Canada to be one of the most secular countries in the world. The church here must come to grips with the implications of this – essentially we as leaders need to think like missionaries. Each congregation is a mission “outpost” like the churches in Ephesus or Corinth, etc. How would we instruct leaders in our churches to think and act in order to best bring the gospel into their contexts?

Thus the context of the women in ministry leadership could be seen with a number of questions in mind:

- How will freeing or restricting access to leadership help us in our mission?
- How will those to whom we are reaching perceive our approach?

Menno: Dave can we exist as a conference of churches if we allow individual churches to decide for themselves whether or not to accept women as their lead pastors?

Vision for this Issue

Dave:

Absolutely. In fact, I would like to charge/challenge/ask (not just “allow”) each church to figure out what its approach to leadership will be, given its context. Team leadership or hierarchical? Women and/or men? There are other questions – all of which will balance adherence to biblical instruction and the need of the gospel.

The 250 churches that comprise the Mennonite Brethren in Canada will be unified around the centrality of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord of the world, the Bible as our authority for life and practice, and around the God-given mission of extending the good news of his Kingdom to those in our lives. But each church has a unique context and character. Thus the actual approach to how we will invite people toward these unifying truths will differ from church to church.

Will there be churches that decide not to accept women as their lead pastor? Yes, but I would hope that their conclusion will be based on their mission context. (For example a church in Seattle has intentionally determined that, given the complete lack of male presence, models and leadership among the many youth and young adults they reach, they need to put men into leadership positions. I would consider this to be a missional decision acceptable within the spirit of the proposed BFL recommendation).

The BFL proposal will allow for churches to make that decision. I hope that our churches don't simply default to traditional interpretations and practices, but sharpen their focus, understand the people they are reaching, and make the decision accordingly. However, there are churches that need to be fully open to women leading in all positions – again, missionally, not just because of secular egalitarianism – and the proposed policy is designed to free churches to go there.

I believe this will ultimately strengthen the whole enterprise of our conference.

Another result will be the freeing of women with apostolic gifts to plant churches.

Another might be a new openness to establishing different kinds of churches (like house churches, cell based, etc) that are more positioned to reach neighbours and friends for Christ – which are freeing contexts for women to act and use their gifts.

And another might be a new dawning of a missional mindset that contextualizes all of our operations – as a conference, as a Board of Faith and Life, and as congregations and members.

Conclusions

Menno:

I would like to put this issue in context. If we elevate the issue of women in leadership to an essential element of our confession of faith, giving latitude to churches, that will compromise our integrity.

If, however, we ‘downgrade’ the issue to something hermeneutical characterized by differing views by competent and respected leaders, then there is not a serious problem. It is rational to believe that in matters where the Bible is not clear enough to give us consensus, the matters are not of all that much significance. For example, there is no merit in the view that opening the door to women to be lead pastors is a step towards allowing same sex marriage, etc. There is no ambiguity in the Scriptural view of marriage.

Dave:

A missional church finds its way by identifying its missional context, listening to God’s direction to address the issues in that context, and does what it takes to introduce the Gospel to as many as will listen and respond. The church, like Paul, must do whatever it takes to reach some.

There are signals from the Biblically defined character of the church that should lead us to reframe the women in church leadership question. Gifts are given to all. Leadership comes from a team. Baptism defines equality, and a biblical egalitarianism is different than the ‘world’ version of egalitarianism and liberation.

And, while there are restrictions in the New Testament about women in leadership, there are also examples of women leading, teaching men and so on.

Moreover, excellent scholars who adhere to the scriptures as the final authority in life and practice come out on both ‘sides’ of this issue. And our international brothers and sisters are grappling with this issue – from whom we also can learn.

I believe the Board of Faith and Life and the Mennonite Brethren are dealing with a timely concern with enough strength in theology and unity to stay true to core faith elements while learning to contextualize ministry appropriately.

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