



**CANADIAN CONFERENCE**  
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

**ARTICLE 12 [MB Confession of Faith]**

# Society and State

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

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Article 12 of the confession deals with the relationship of Christians to the state. Attention is focused on the responsibility of government to “promote the well-being of all people” and to “maintain law and order.” As believers we are admonished to support the government with obedience, taxes, and prayer, while still remembering that our primary allegiance is to Christ’s kingdom, not to the state or society. In our complex modern world it can be difficult for believers to appropriately give allegiance to Christ’s kingdom while still respecting governmental authority and praying for leaders. Specific direction in the basic categories noted in Article 12 continues to be important.

### **The New Realities**

According to Article 12, Christians are to cooperate with others in society to advance public welfare and order. Relationship to the state in previous years was often defined by a one-time encounter with the draft board, by conscription in time of war, or by an occasional encounter with use of the oath. We are now faced with more complex issues involving Christians and the state. In the United States, for example, we live in a time when the advancement of public welfare and the maintenance of law and order are increasingly distinguished from one another. In recent years the focus of government has steadily moved toward maintenance of law and order (as defined by more severe penalties for violations of the law and increased spending on prisons) and away from public welfare (as defined by spending and programs involving education, health care, and public works). Greater portions of our tax dollars are now being spent to punish rather than prevent and to incarcerate rather than to educate. These realities are being felt more keenly within our congregations as all levels of society and government look toward the church for help in addressing the resulting gaps in public care.

The pressure of state and society is to give priority to law and order. The desire to protect our families and maintain our personal and financial security may lead us in the same direction. It is our responsibility to act out of allegiance to God’s kingdom as citizens of heaven and those who look forward to the imminent return of Christ. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation in situations of sin and brokenness. We cannot be ambassadors of Christ if our allegiance is rooted in a particular nation. This applies to the local congregation as well. Are we ready, as citizens of heaven and members of a local congregation, to respond to the needs of public welfare left unaddressed by the state? Are we ready to witness to the state about the need to defend the weak and care for the poor?

### **The New Influences**

Relationship to government as defined primarily by issues of participation in the military, swearing of oaths, or payment of taxes can no longer be the sum of our focus when considering the modern pressures of society and state. We must more consciously consider the subtle and increasingly pervasive influences of the broader social order.

The historic position of the Mennonite Brethren is that we give primary allegiance to the kingdom of God, not the state. The history of Mennonite migrations and stories of conscientious objectors to military service provide ample testimony. With the decreasing overt influence of the state in our lives (such as in general conscription), issues of ultimate allegiance become less clear. Occupational pursuits, nuclear



family priorities, and concern for immediate and longterm personal security are becoming greater influences upon decisions made in regard to the Christian's relationship with and witness in society.

On the congregational level, most local churches no longer spend significant time and energy on issues of military conscription or the exercise of oaths. This is true partly because of changing social realities and partly because many of these questions have been addressed or dismissed in the past when these issues seemed more urgent. However, specific situations do persist.

Congregations continue to have ample opportunity to exercise faithful witness to the kingdom of God in light of the pressures of society and state. Following are only a few examples of the many ways in which we can witness faithfully in the world while rejecting those pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity. These highlight some areas of "rub" that can occur while we dwell in this world, yet live as citizens of a higher kingdom who look forward to the unexpected and imminent return of Christ.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

What does it mean to witness against racism, sexism, and classism, and live as those whose citizenship is in heaven? In recent history our national denomination has been mono-ethnic and solidly middle-class. It is now becoming more ethnically and economically diverse. A real challenge exists for those of Northern European ancestry who have historically held power and staffed the structure of the denomination. We must respond faithfully and with integrity to the existing under-represented congregations already a part of our structures, and the congregations of new immigrants and people of other backgrounds who wish to join our denomination. It is a great challenge to be accountable to one another, individually and as congregations, in the spirit of God's love for us. We must recognize our temptation to control others and trust God to work in others, finding appropriate ways to share our material wealth and privileged position without being manipulative. We have a tremendous opportunity within denominational structures to be a reconciling presence and healing light in an age full of the darkness of racism, sexism, and classism. We are called to become the church of Revelation 7:9—"a great multitude...from every nation."

### **Immigration Issues**

What does it mean to witness against discrimination and defend the weak in an era of tightening and increasingly complex immigration regulations? Immigrants who are church members and illegal aliens share their illegal status and testify to the grace of God at district Mennonite Brethren Conferences. In light of such texts as the Old Testament injunctions to accommodate the alien and stranger (Deut. 24:17-18), Jesus' words about our responses to prisoners and strangers (Matt. 25:31-46), and the New Testament command to show hospitality to others including strangers (Heb. 13:1-2), we must take seriously the call to live faithfully by discerning appropriate responses to our immigrant sisters and brothers, and by rejecting the compromising pressures of public opinion and harsh and confusing laws.

Local churches, on their own or in combination with other churches, can actively address the physical and spiritual needs of the marginalized in their communities. Some congregations are attended by significant numbers of illegal immigrants. For many more congregations, immigration and documentation issues are very pressing. With the continuing adoption of congregations of recent immigrants into the denominational fold, we must consider more seriously the current changes in immigration law and the increasingly restrictive and confusing immigration policies with stiffer penalties. Can traditionally middle-class Mennonite Brethren churches respond compassionately to immigrant sisters and brothers living in our midst, yet in need? Faithful witness might even take the form of advocacy with elected officials, encouraging them to respond with compassion to those who are on the margins in our communities.

### **Prison Issues**

What does it mean for ambassadors of the reconciling Christ to pay state taxes which support a system of retributive incarceration? In some states, residential burglary can mean a 25-year sentence in state prison. Is it enough to send letters and once-per-quarter packages to the ones incarcerated? As those whose allegiance is to the kingdom of God, we should work to address basic injustices in the system. When attachment to our material possessions is so great that we are willing to support long-term incarceration as



punishment rather than address the individual and root causes of the offense, we are assenting to societal pressures that can compromise our Christian integrity.

Taking seriously the call to forgive and disciple others allows us to proclaim our allegiance to God's reconciling kingdom rather than the divisive kingdom of this world. Particular attention should be given to those publicly ostracized and often brutalized such as the homeless, recently released prisoners, legal and illegal aliens, and those marginalized because of skin color, manner of speech, or physical and mental abilities. Involvement with local organizations that minister to prisoners and work to find preventative solutions can also be a point of connection for local congregations looking for ways to embody the reconciling love of God.

### **Individual Security**

What priority do we give our personal comfort and long-term security as those who resist the idolatrous temptation to give devotion to the state? This is another area in which we may find common practice at odds with Jesus' kingdom call. What is our responsibility to the increasing needs of those losing basic public assistance in our own communities or those experiencing overwhelming poverty in other parts of the world? Are we willing to share part of the interest generated by our capital or even to give some of our capital away? Will we encourage government to care for the weak and poor at the expense of state-guaranteed retirement benefits? It is a fallacy for citizens of heaven to believe that future security can be guaranteed on earth by trusting in our individual abilities to provide for ourselves or the state's ability to do so. The reality is that others perish, physically and spiritually, when we refuse to share. When we abdicate our Christian responsibility to care for others, we violate the spirit of Article 12.

The local congregation is an ideal forum in which to explore the undeserved blessings given to us by God, to witness to one another about our mutual dependence, and to support one another in making investment and retirement decisions that reflect the values of God's kingdom.

### **Daily Life**

It is easy to overlook the significance of the ordinary. The state now permeates our lives to a degree that our forebears would not have understood. We depend upon the state for health, safety, consumer regulations, business incentives, vital networks of transportation, regulation of utilities, and for guarantees of minimum wages and benefits. We expect that government will guarantee safe food and water, security of our homes and families, and opportunities for persons to support themselves. It is our practice, if not our confession, to trust government for the provision of those things needed to sustain us on a daily basis. Ongoing discernment is needed to ensure that our ultimate trust remains in God over government.

Beyond the words we use to describe our relationship to God and government, there are a series of symbols by which we represent that relationship in the daily life of the church. Many sanctuaries contain a large Bible to demonstrate the centrality of the Word and a pulpit to emphasize the preaching of the Word, a cross to remind us of the sacrifice of Christ and perhaps a cup and plate to signify our communal sharing in Christ's sacrifice, horizontally aligned seating that orients us toward the word or perhaps semi-circular orienting us more toward the community of faith. Some congregations display the national flag with the Christian flag in a specific, subordinate relationship as is prescribed in the display of the national flag, symbolic of thanks and loyalty to the nation. The contradictory juxtaposition of such divergent symbols of loyalty cannot be ignored when considering what it means to give primary allegiance to God's kingdom.

It is in our daily life that our beliefs become real, to ourselves and to those around us. When we speak the words of God and live by the patterns of scripture, we exemplify our allegiance to God. Our churches also provide clues into the nature of our ultimate fidelity. The role of government, and its negative expression in unchecked nationalism, so obviously tearing people apart around the world, remains a great challenge for us in North America as we consider how to declare in word and deed and symbol where our ultimate allegiance resides. Our recognition of and response to the pervasive nature of government influence in our lives and churches has much to say about how we live out our Christian integrity and witness.



## Participation in Government

Article 12 does not specifically address the issue of those who choose to participate directly in government. Christians are admonished to “cooperate with others in society” to achieve the ends God sets out for the state, but are clearly distinguished from the state. The article encourages prayer for and an attitude of respect toward government authorities. Some in our churches choose to participate more actively in the daily affairs of government through elected or other positions, and some work directly in law enforcement areas, potentially placing themselves in situations involving the use of deadly force.

While there is no outright prohibition to these activities in Article 12, a key consideration is the statement, “As ambassadors for Christ, Christians act as agents of reconciliation, and seek the well-being of all peoples.” In this area, as with other aspects of our relationship to society, there is a good deal of discernment necessary in following the example of Christ, who consistently challenged the rich and powerful and stood up for the poor and powerless. Involvement in political parties and governmental processes presents unique, and often difficult, challenges in following this model.

It should also be noted that simple abstention from direct involvement in governmental affairs does not free one from such considerations. There is much benefit and security derived from the proper function of government as instituted by God. Just as we recognize the pervasive nature of government influence in our daily lives, so we must recognize the security and freedoms that surround the majority. These benefits should not lessen our desire to follow the model of Christ who spoke boldly to the powers of his time and was willing to suffer the consequences for doing so. Whether we participate directly in government or are recipients of its benefits, we must continue to discern our relationship to the state and our response to pressures which threaten to compromise Christian integrity.

## Finding Our Way

Over the years we have worked to find our way regarding the proper relationship of Christians to the state. In these changing times we continue to focus our attention and discernment upon a host of less obvious ways in which society and state can influence our lives, affect the needs of those around us, and compromise our commitment and witness as citizens of God’s kingdom.

