

Bishop Committee Report
April 6, 2011

We thank you for your continued support involvement and patience in the effort of unifying the constituent body of ministers and churches around biblically based values and norms. These discussions are aimed at addressing misgivings about the current state of affairs in our constituency. We live in a society that is buffeted by winds of change that are driven in large measure by the prince of the power of the air. While he continues his relentless effort at destroying us from within and without, our Lord equips us to withstand his onslaught and give the grace to be victorious. We believe it is important that we make an honest attempt at addressing our current needs in ways that continue to build on the foundation that is laid, Jesus Christ. He, the Lord of the church years to be Lord of every life under our shepherding. He has also commissioned us, who know Him as both Savior and Lord, to bring others to himself through our witness. While we cannot dictate in detail to future generations just how to respond to the pressures of their time, it is our responsibility as servant leaders to make every effort to build in such a way that aids them in fulfilling the above stated objectives.

Over the past year we have had numerous opportunities to interact with some of you, both informally and at the bishops' meeting last December. It is our belief that the desire to meet the needs of our people and to reach out to others is universal among us. Just how we best accomplish the task is where we find growing differences. To all of us it seems apparent that to fulfill the objective of nurturing souls under our care some defined boundaries are important. Some feel we have over emphasized parameters at the expense of reaching others with the gospel of peace. When it comes to our witness, we urge caution in overrating the value or the obstacle that our separated lifestyle is in winning souls for the Kingdom. Both perspectives can have a flawed focus. We need to focus on the redemptive power of the cross that calls us to a radical change of heart that affects the way we live and the things we do.

The results of last year's survey indicate significant support, that as a constituency, we define minimums that represent a consensus of the ideals we hold to as a brotherhood of churches. The reason for defining minimums stems from concerns that the differences among us will lead us to a spiritual coldness and make it increasingly difficult to work together on a variety of fronts. These include our group effort in missions, Calvary Bible School, and providing service opportunities for young people. Could following through with such an effort be carried out effectively with our current model of congregational autonomy or should we consider moving toward a more structured model of organization? Up to now, participation has been voluntary and based on each congregation's perception of what defines reasonable commonality and allowable parameters in relation to the rest of constituency churches.

With the continuing formation of the Beachy constituency in the late 50's and early 60's, constituent churches united around what seemed to be similar goals and values. Many of the goals and values were understood or assumed but very little was formally documented. For a short time compliance to a certain set of standards was a prerequisite for becoming a "members church", but enforcing that criteria has been abandoned. By now it is unclear what all was included in those conditions. We continue to see value in maintaining an appropriate affinity among us that enhances our ability to relate to each other.

As we look at the prospect of formalizing parameters that define who we are, several questions emerge.

How much of our belief and practice should this definition include? Who primarily would it serve? Should it be a written statement that is ratified by the ministers of the constituency, or should we continue with oral commitments based on mutual understanding of what is accepted? The latter option would be the simplest in many ways. The question remains, would this approach help us meet the objectives we are reaching for and provide appropriately for the future of the constituency? Would it be wise to combine the two ideas? Documenting the non-negotiables such as the doctrinal positions we hold, and allowing our commitment to the constituency on practical applications to be a matter of sensitivity to brotherhood consensus?

To relate to each other based on our assumption of doctrinal understanding has, for the most part, served us well, but has the time come to document a mission statement that represents our understanding of scripture and its out working in our lives?

In last year's survey the one practical item that was mentioned as a possible defining issue for us in the past was the non-use of the radio among us. A large majority of the respondents concurred with that understanding. We assume that those respondents still make that a practical application in their congregation and see that as a valid safeguard. While not all conservative Anabaptist groups have adopted this application, we believe there is significantly more to be gained by its non-use than its use. Let's be honest and recognize that depending on how we use the Internet our position on radio use is inconsistent. We appeal to your sensitivity to other churches in the constituency in this matter as you guide your congregations in their choices.

Given the above we propose the following:

1. That there be a mission statement drawn up that represents our understanding of biblical matters that don't change. We envision this committee overseeing such a document but drawing from the strengths of other ordained brothers to help provide breadth and detail.
2. That at the meeting planned for bishops Dec. 6th of this year one of the topics for discussion would be the question of structure for our constituency. Any consensus for the direction we move on the matter would be presented at the ministers meeting in 2012. We see this as an issue that needs input and consideration from the entire ministerial body.
3. That we continue to cultivate respect for the sensitivities of sister churches. One way to show deference to the body could be to forego voting on constituency issues if the practice in our church is at variance from the rest of the constituency.

The Beachy constituency has been characterized over the years by good will toward others who have a differing point of view and even practice. How best to maintain that spirit and be faithful to our own conscience is an ideal we all reach for. One of the ways to best accomplish that is through honest and open dialog. While communication doesn't necessarily resolve all our differences it does help to minimize misgivings and can help us face honestly our own biases and conclusions. God does bless any sincere effort on our part at following hard after a relationship with Him and our brother.

The Bishop Committee