

2016 Bishop Committee Report

Jesus said, "...I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The powers of darkness can't stop the advancement of the Church of Jesus Christ!

Our constituency has grown and evolved over the past 50 - 60 years. Our Old Order roots have obviously influenced our view of church structure and inter-church relationships. Some other Conservative Anabaptist groups have been influenced by their Mennonite roots approach of conferences and more centralized church government. Ultimately, though, our goals are the same in that of being followers, imitators, and servants of Jesus Christ. We Anabaptists have historically placed a high value on brotherhood and submission to the local gathered body of believers. Understanding and applying Biblical truth and guidelines for holy living are arrived at in a corporate manner. For us, the emphasis for brotherhood has been in the local body first, and secondly in constituency, while for other groups, the reverse has been true.

The past 50 - 60 years have also brought changes to our world. That has affected who we are today. Here are a few of them:

1. Affluence. We are wealthier with more money, assets, and free (non-working) time at our disposal. This is especially true for conservative Mennonite people. Our hard work, ethics, and thrift, have paid financial dividends.

2. Rapidly changing technology. Closely related to #1 is the ease and affordability of travel, advances in medical science, the ease of communication, and readily- and quickly-available information and media.

3. Changes in society's attitude toward established norms and mores. There is an increasing mindset of allowing individuals to choose what feels right for themselves and to not need to submit to cultural or religious expectations. An obvious example of this is the huge push in our country to accept homosexuality as a normal and acceptable lifestyle. Odd is okay, even desirable.

4. Unprecedented religious freedom. We are free up to the time of this writing to live out our beliefs with little fear of retribution and little scorn. For example, our conscientious objection to warfare position is not challenged and rarely scorned. We do not even need to apply for alternative service for the past 40+ years. We are still granted exemption from jury duty. Contributions to our mission efforts, in many cases, reduce our taxes. Our church buildings are free of property taxes. We can take the Gospel to our jails and prisons. We face little, if any, opposition in our communities.

These four things have influenced who we are today as individuals, churches, and as a constituency. We have tended to become less dependent on each other, and more individualistic in establishing guidelines for holy living. Because of the size we have become there is less of the close-knit ties of 50 years ago. This has led to more variation of thought and practices, and as a result, accompanying concern. These concerns have been expressed to the Bishop Committee over the years, and out of that has come our annual gathering of bishops, and more recently, the regional meetings. One intent of these meetings is to provide a time for more personal and intentional communication about these concerns among us leaders.

The bishops present at the annual meeting at Penn Valley in November heard verbal reports of eight regional meetings. An overall majority favored continuing our present

understanding of a voluntary non-voting status for those churches who allow use of radio. There was a lack of clarity, however, in what constituted radio outside of traditional radio and further thought and discussion is warranted.

We have one more year of the agreed upon trial period of three years for regional meetings, and we plan to vote at the 2017 Annual Ministers Meetings on whether to continue them or not. We as a committee see the need for open and meaningful communication among us if we desire to exist as a constituency with a sense of common goals and accountable relationships.

There seems to be some confusion about the action taken at the 2015 Ministers Meeting, and an explanation is in order. The vote to continue down the path of establishing more criteria, or additional, specific definition of who we are as a constituency, narrowly failed to reach the two-thirds majority threshold. Our thought as a committee was that if the vote failed we should "take a break" from that discussion for five years, but that the understood expectations among us would continue. We have certainly not closed the door on sharing and discussing concerns, or revisiting the idea of more defining lines.

We also feel that there can be value in some diversity of operations (I Cor 12:6) when there is unity of purpose. It can be a proof to the world of Christ-like love in our ability to work together in joint efforts, in spite of our differences. (John 13:35) Let's recognize that suspicion and distrust of each other can cause us to lose focus on the bigger picture of what Christ is doing in building His church. Let's also recognize that we must help each other in our efforts against worldliness and carnality. Let's not allow either of these (suspicion or worldliness) to destroy our unity of purpose in such a way that it affects our ministry efforts and our witness to a broken and strife-filled world that desperately needs to find life in Jesus.

We reinforce and encourage your efforts as leaders to address the issues produced by affluence, technology, individualism, and worldliness on a congregational level. We continue to embrace the idea of dialogue on these issues at a constituency level as well. "Lest Satan should get an advantage of us for we are not ignorant of his devices." (II Corinthians 2:11)

The Bishop Committee

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Tim Miller (Secretary)

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