

Dialogues, Diversities, and Divisions: What Do We Do with Constituency Growth?

How big do the Beachys want to get? 20,000? 60,000? 250,000? 1,000,000? At what point do we say, “That’s big enough!” And what do we do in response? Who takes the initiative?

Or, if nothing happens, when will Beachys start renting out massive inner-city convention centers to hold annual meetings? When will business meeting sessions be five-day affairs instead of five hours because there are just that many organizations?

This seems far-fetched at the moment. Yet, do we have a clear idea of what will keep this from happening? If growth continues unabated at current rates, we will be looking at around 25,000 members and 40,000 people by 2050. This numbers among the very largest of plain Anabaptist groups—the Lancaster Amish, the Holmes County Amish, and the Holdeman Mennonites. Most plain Anabaptist groups do not ever rise above several thousand. If we have many people turning down invitations to speak at the annual ministers’ meeting for the sheer intimidation it holds, or declining to serve on the bishop committee, how many more will be intimidated by a body twice the current size?

Our pattern of managing growth is uncoordinated, with the correlated stress giving rise to unplanned divisions. No one is advocating for an unplanned-division approach to skim off some growth but neither has anyone proposed a workable alternative. Rather, the call has been to work through differences in hopes of achieving unity. But this alternative (if it actually worked) would only balloon the Beachy population to inner-city convention center-proportions. Is that what we want for the Beachys?

Though not the first subgroups off the Beachys, three Amish-Mennonite fellowships emerged in the years sandwiching 2000: Maranatha, Ambassadors, and Berea. These withdrawals took some members, but the Beachys rebounded and continued growing. Just this spring, another group emerged consisting of an Ohio-based nucleus. While the 2016 ministers’ meeting attendance was consequently down from recent years, attendance will quickly rebound.

Large groups of any sort face common challenges. Some secular groups ably handle large sizes, such as big businesses managing thousands of employees or militaries with tens of thousands or entire governments with millions of people. But are the mechanisms such large groups use to manage people ideal for the church? Among the reasons Anabaptists originally opposed state churches was that state-scaled sizes do not permit a sense of oneness among brothers, the kind of intimacy needed to encourage one another in a holy walk. Among conservative Anabaptists, the high standards we maintain demands close-knit churches and constituencies to help people maintain these standards against an evil world pressing in.

The most consistent challenge for large groups is diversity. More people means more diversity. When the Beachys went from being a loosely scattered set of churches to a constituency in the 1950s and 1960s, people came together because they had common interests and goals. Ministers’ meetings started in the 1960s as an assembly of like-minded leaders with a similar background and practice working toward a shared goal—namely, missions. Ministers’ meetings were a means to meeting their shared goals. Without a shared outlook, the group would never have met.

As then, today's churches and leaders are not cookie-cutters of each other. There *is* diversity. Diversity in the church is often applauded, and indeed is needed, for Paul calls attention to the many parts of the body working together (1 Corinthians 12). This diversity is complementary, like puzzle pieces with their different grooves fitting together, working together to achieve a common goal. However, another kind of diversity is often confused with complementary diversity: when ideas and practices are diverse because they are mutually exclusive of each other: I say "no" to this, you say, "It is okay." I say, "More of this," you say "less." I say our main focus should be on this, you say our main focus should be on that. When people have developed two positions that cannot be reconciled, then they are *exclusive* of one another. It is still diversity, but one that cannot be harmonized, negotiated, or talked through.

Today, with such a large population of Beachys, we are all the more likely to take different, mutually exclusive paths. Treatment of such diversity like it can all fit together only results in stress. In the process of trying to reconcile mutually exclusive outlooks, our energy is spent on forcing puzzle pieces together that do not fit. We attempt to fit them together through dialogue. When discussion was started in 2010 at an annual bishops' meeting, some hoped that we would soon agree on specific lines. This did not happen, and there is an underlying explanation.

The idea of postmodernism has been far more influential on society than the label itself. Its influence has seeped into many groups, including religions. One of the main tenets of postmodernism is that concrete truth is unknowable. The only thing we can know is what people in conversation agree on at any given moment. Even this agreement is tenuous, as time, places, and people change. Thus, a hallmark of postmodernist behavior is to "keep the conversation going," not to ever arrive at concrete truth, but to only figure out what can be agreed on at any given moment. The result is gatherings and committees that meet regularly to discuss *things*.

What things? It does not matter as much as the fact that they are dialoguing. The end goal of dialoguing is what drives the development of agendas, not an agenda that drives the need to hold a meeting.

What continuous dialoguing does is make truth relative and arbitrary over time. For Christians who believe that God has laid out absolutes, this has stark consequences for the way we think about and live out Christianity. We would not deny absolute truth, but have we taken on patterns of that idea? Are our meetings—at both the constituency and church level—based on the occasional demand to sort out truth and walk away with answers, or are they just to "keep the conversation going," never arriving at concrete answers? In the past, when our forefathers came to a place where truth needed to be discerned, they called a *Dienerversammlung*, a meeting of leaders aimed at bringing about resolution satisfactory to all. The hallmark difference between these meetings and postmodernist meetings is that our forefathers walked away having made a concrete resolution. The need to meet to discern truth was satisfied.

Dialogue preys upon mutually exclusive differences, seeking not to reconcile them but make them arbitrary. And yet, much energy is spent dialoguing over mutually exclusive differences when people do not realize that the end-goal is not to arrive at a concrete outcome. People keep meeting and dialoguing, not because they have a common vision, but because they are plugged

into an ever-growing set of conversation-oriented activities and organizations that are not easily dismantled.

Our energy is better utilized toward the different visions among us, furthering God's kingdom in smaller church clusters. These clusters will not be alike, but there is great benefit to releasing others to God to focus on our own work. Look at all the Beachys started and accomplished in the mid-century years! Our most visible mission efforts began at that time. When brothers agree, they can act on their shared vision. They may need to discuss things when the demand arises, but the focus should always be on an outcome and getting back to action.

But *who* is keeping the whole constituency together when there are such differences? Large groups tend to develop layers of bureaucracy: one set of committees, meetings, and chairmen after another. People who occupy important positions tend to be moderates, the third figure on the liberal-conservative continuum. Moderates are claimed by all sides yet moderates do not stand clearly with any side. True to their name, their tendency is to moderate; both sides look to them for answers and direction. Moderates are at their best when they help facilitate the many parts of the body, helping to bring about reconciliation and bringing all parties to the table to work out concrete agreements to move forward. They are at their worst when they come to occupy positions of influence and insist that the whole burgeoning structure, despite many mutually exclusive differences, stays together. In the back of their mind, they realize that if different groups go their way, they will have to decide on one of them.

Liberals may be cold and conservatives may be hot (or vice versa, it matters not). What matters is that hot and cold are mutually exclusive, yet both are pleasing in their own right, a cold or hot drink for example (Revelation 3:15-16). The great temptation moderates face is in blending hot and cold together. The lukewarm result is, as God states, to be spewed out. Be *something* to God and put your all into it, do not try to be everything, find your place and use the talents given. Where moderates cannot bring together mutually exclusive differences, they are better off finding a place among the cold or hot rather than building reinforcing layers of bureaucracy that only cement together their place in the middle of something pulling from all sides

It is 2016. A new group has begun this year. It is curious that after five years of bishops' meetings and two years of regional meetings, we could not have done more to help facilitate this move, beyond simply acknowledging their departure at the 2016 meeting. Should we not send them off with some of the programs and resources they helped build in our midst and that would match their vision? Could we have helped decide with them which of our churches would fit best among their churches? To delineate what exactly are the different outlooks between the Beachys and the new group, in the event lay members on either side need assistance in deciding if they should transfer churches at this time? Could we have been more proactive?

Those remaining among the Beachys ought to be jealous of the opportunities before the new group. With a shared vision, they will be better able to allocate their resources to their vision. With a smaller group, they will be better able to mobilize people to this cause. The Beachy denomination, on the other hand, remains large and cumbersome, still containing many mutually exclusive differences which will continue to sap energy that could be spent on advancing God's kingdom in many different ways.

What end do we serve by keeping this Beachy organization afloat? What end, that could not be better implemented through more intimate subgroups? We may find it difficult to pursue separate small groups because of the friendly ties we have forged over the years. Yet, to part, to bless one another, and to release one another to God preserves these ties better than maintaining them amidst tension, under the constant fear of “another division,” and with ever-continuing growth.

Today, if the Beachy constituency dissolved and people had to naturally regroup, would it look the same as before? Would we end up back with what we have now? That is a litmus test of true unity. Are we holding together something that should not be and spending our resources on trying to unify something with many mutually exclusive differences?

My short-term vision for the Beachy constituency is this: that the 2016 division will not just be “another division” along the timeline of history, but that it can be the first of several new subgroups forming under the Beachy movement umbrella, not as a shaking-the-dust-off-our-shoes parting, but as a releasing of one another to pursue distinctive visions and a continuation of working together in case-by-case ways as long as it makes sense. We must rethink the way we manage growth, encouraging and blessing the formation of smaller subgroups when it is evident a new vision—mutually exclusive from others’ visions as it may be—has arisen that is able to serve God in another way.

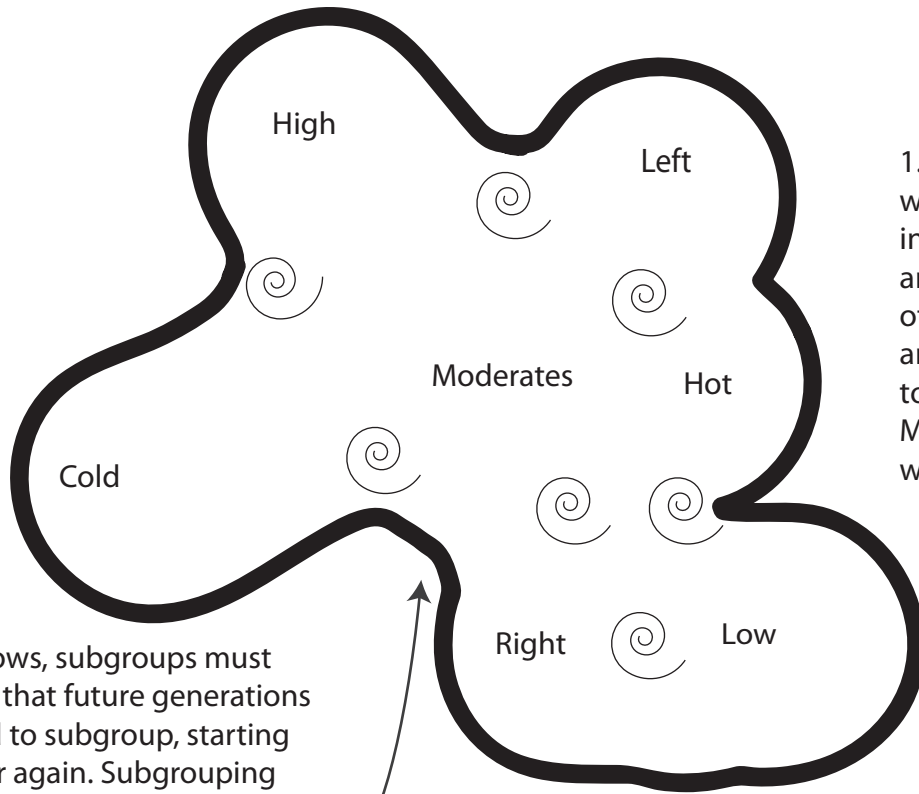
The ideal is for subgroups to start simultaneously so as not to pit the big group remaining against the little group starting. That format lends itself to people insinuating who is a winner or loser, who is on the right track or the wrong. Without subgrouping, either the Beachy churches will grow to a size and diversity as to make the constituency name meaningless or more accidental divisions will break off to skim unchecked growth.

I have described how subgrouping could look in the *Amish-Mennonite Population Report of 2012* (<http://www.beachyam.org/secure/MM2012/PopReport2012.pdf>) and will not repeat it here. Included, however, is a model that visualizes how constituency subgroups could look. It shows a move from one large group with different pushes in mutually exclusive directions to the creation of subgroups out of these pushes.

In this age of lackluster faith, we need to do all we can to strengthen the conviction of churches. *If we remain a large, diverse group, we will stand for only the lowest denominator among us all.* We should look not only to today’s differences but, right now, plan ahead for the next generation and the likelihood that they, too, will need to subgroup should the Lord grant our people growth.

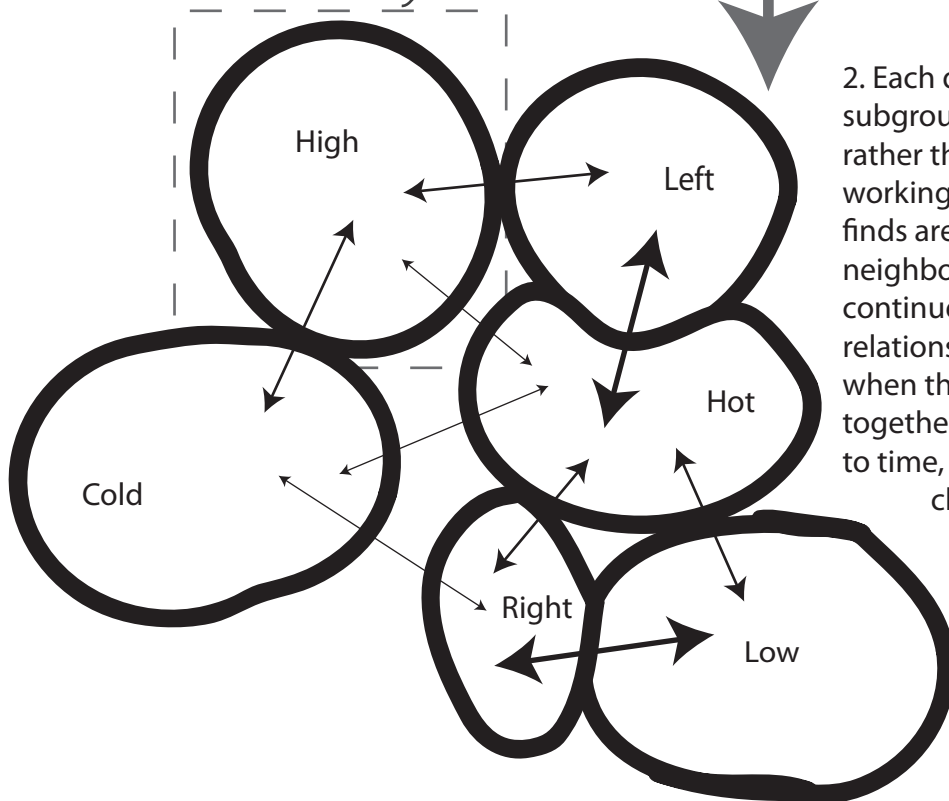
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A Model of the Constituency: From One Large Group to Multiple Subgroups



1. One group, but with bulges looking in new directions and the areas of tension that arise from staying together (spirals). Moderates hold the whole system together.

3. As each grows, subgroups must keep in mind that future generations will also need to subgroup, starting the cycle over again. Subgrouping is a privilege of strong growth.



2. Each direction forms its own subgroup, focusing on its goals rather than the wide spectrum. Some working together remains as each finds areas of commonality with neighbors (arrows). As groups continue changing, these relations are freer to shift than when the whole group is held together in one entity. From time to time, some churches may need to change to a neighboring group, an easier process when respect of other groups exists.