

RESOURCES FOR OUR SEASON OF DISCERNMENT

Submitted by the Pastoral Leadership Commission, MC Sask. October, 2004

A FOREWORD

The “Joined in Faithfulness” decisions accepted by our conference delegates in 2002 pledged our commitment to a Season of Discernment,

“describing a period of four years in which MC Sask is to continue to seek an understanding of God’s will where we at this point disagree. This disagreement centers on the place and role of people in same-sex covenanted relationships in our Congregations and Conference.”

What do we mean by “Season of Discernment?”

The “Joined in Faithfulness” document describes this as follows:

Season suggests a somewhat flexible yet defined time period for this discernment.

Discernment suggests that God’s Will has been made known, but we as God’s people need to discover what that Will is.

The intent is that in speaking to each other, listening carefully, and seeking the mind of God in prayer we will find a new sense of what is God-ly and a new will to be both united and diverse in a Spirit-inspired relationship of love.

Note that this discernment season seeks both “a new sense of what is God-ly” and “a new will to be both united and diverse in a Spirit-inspired relationship of love.” (*These Recommendations are reprinted below in Appendix 1.*)

Where are we?

MC Sask leadership has asked the Pastoral Leadership Commission (PLC) to provide leadership and resources for this “Season”. PLC has engaged pastors on this subject and has responded to congregational requests. Leaders from over 2/3 of our congregations have participated in PLC sponsored workshops on “Difficult Conversations”, seeking resources and approaches for dealing with more challenging subject areas. Some congregations have entered into studies of various aspects of this subject; others have reported their reticence to open this subject or to allow dissenting perspectives.

Note that we are far from alone in this quest. In 1986 and 1987, bi-national GC and MC delegate bodies committed themselves

to resolutions calling both for a teaching posture (e.g. “that sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and woman united in marriage”) and for a pastoral response (e.g. a commitment “to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue.”) The Saskatoon resolution asserted “that we are all sinners in need of God’s grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance.”

Congregations and conferences in Canada and the USA have struggled to live into those 1986-1987 commitments to “take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other” and “to promote congregational study of the complex issues of sexuality through Bible study and the use of Human Sexuality in the Christian Life.”

The following study guide outlines several goals and guidelines relevant for this “Season of Discernment”. We also list some readily accessible resources. Some congregations may choose to start with a less contentious issue, using these approaches to develop their “conversational muscle” before tackling more emotionally laden topics such as sexuality.

GOALS FOR SEASON OF DISCERNMENT STUDIES

1. Ground ourselves in Scripture and love

Sexuality as a subject area evokes powerful visceral reactions, including some of our deepest fears. It is thus all the more important that we exercise careful self discipline as we enter into these discussions. We want to open ourselves to God, to Scripture, to one another.

The first and second commandments call us to “love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and to “love your neighbour as yourself.” Scripture further reminds us that “there is no fear in love” and that “perfect love casts out fear”. Only more recently have social scientists documented how powerfully “fear” works to immobilise our higher brain functions, reducing us to more animalistic “fight/flight” options.

The first goal for such a study is to remain firmly grounded in Scripture and love, coming to this study and to one another with a love for God “with all our minds.”

2. Keep this subject in proper biblical perspective.

As Christians we face the constant temptation to make our issues the priorities of Scripture. If we describe ourselves as under the authority of Scripture, this calls for a new openness to allowing Jesus and the Scriptures to set our priorities.

We remind ourselves that this subject is explicitly named in just over a half dozen places. By contrast, financial matters, justice, salvation and instructions for living together harmoniously each account for many dozens or hundreds. An issue important among us does call for careful study of the Scriptures, and we do such studies remembering Jesus' critique of those who bypass the weightier emphases of Scripture.

As we enter this study, we seek to see our insights and concerns in light of the larger Scriptural themes.

3. Approach this subject and one another with biblically informed attitudes

Many texts speak about the importance of our attitudes and the ways we use our tongues. Our society's secular values may condone caricature, distortion and mockery of opposing viewpoints; our faith calls us toward a higher ethic. May the following pave the way toward practising that better way:

1. "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5)
2. "Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you" – this spoken to Rome's Christians deeply divided into separate congregations by their biblically informed but very different beliefs and practices around circumcision, dietary law etc. (Romans 15:7)
3. "The whole assembly kept silence and listened" - the method that allowed a deeply divided church to sense the Spirit's movement (Acts 15:12).
4. "There is no fear in love." (1 John 4:18). Name our fears, the "they" whom we fear. What practices or attitudes help us recover this holy love-powered fearlessness?
5. Rather than speak about an opponent, we seek to speak with them. This may mean, at a minimum, bringing in their materials or even better a person. Our peace workers point out how those urging their countries into war first negatively stereotype the enemy, leaving them faceless. We need not agree with an opponent, but we do need to recognise him or her as a person loved by our God. We therefore seek to see opponents as persons, face to face.
6. Can we, in fact, ever claim to have had loving dialogue with our opponents until that point when we have listened and understood them so well that we would be able to explain (persuasively enough to "sell") their ideas?

4. Seek truth

Discernment is rooted in openness to truth. This requires a spirit of openness, assuming that we do not yet fully understand all that God has for us. If our God is as big as the God of Scripture, we can dare to ask questions, seek to understand opposing views, and, like the Bereans, search the Scriptures to see whether these things are so.

This requires careful, loving, patient listening to both supporter and opponent of whatever posture we begin with. Speaking ill of an opponent by misrepresenting their viewpoint is slander, an oft named biblical sin.

"Speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) must always be our method, not only in those cases of heresy mentioned by Paul, but in all conversations. In these ways we seek truth, the mind of Christ who alone could claim to be "the way, the truth, the life."

5. Seek God's will regarding these issues

During this Season of Discernment we want to find more biblically faithful responses both to gay and lesbian persons (plus their parents, siblings etc), as well as to congregations who may have approaches similar to or different from our own.

Note that our various official statements outline a teaching posture, and urge loving pastoral responses. Many responses short change one or other of these themes.

STUDY OUTLINE

Please note that the following outline does not provide detail. It is intended primarily as a process guide as you approach this subject, or as you begin your discernment by practicing with a less charged subject.

1. Set the context carefully

Many congregations have participated in “Difficult Conversations” workshops. **Prior work on skills for disagreeing agreeably** can be an important asset for developing the “conversational muscle” helpful for such charged topics.

Many congregations find it helpful to enter each such discussion with some prior agreement on “**ground rules**” for such meetings – e.g. how we will speak to and about each other and about those not present, confidentiality expectations etc. A sample is printed below (*Appendix 2*).

Approach this and other topics prayerfully. Frame your meetings with worship and prayer, holding in prayer one another and your conversation partners from the larger world.

The “Seasons” materials and the documents behind them suggest several purposes. You will find it helpful to **clarify your purposes for individual sessions** - a particular passage, a systematic examination of part of a document etc. It is important to focus on the issue itself and on your own group’s ministry to particular people groups, before exploring interaction with those who through similar study may have come to slightly different conclusions.

2. Provide the necessary materials

You as a group will need to structure your larger study so that you include an ample range of information. There is a wealth of biblical material and experience from the larger church (e.g. church documents or study guides) for us to consider. For each session, choose a manageable selection and ensure that each participant has access to it (in advance if possible).

In this study guide, we list only a few major sources for Mennonite materials. This website address, though far from exhaustive, will point you to all the major official items. Our brief comments are intended as introductions. We also list two recent books by Mennonite authors, recognising that there are many more. Upon request, we at the office can make available print copies for some of these items (i.e. masters from the website).

A Website:

<http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/ChurchDocs.htm>

This website by Loren Johns “directs the reader to the official documents of various church bodies as well as to the informal conversations of various Mennonite brothers and sisters.” On this website, you will find all of the following items (except for the books), and many more. Most can be reprinted for distribution to study groups. The official documents, and this website’s resource on the biblical texts, are:

- Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue (1985). A version (not for duplicating) is available on this site, and this website directs you to sources where copies may be purchased. This dated but comprehensive study includes biblical and social sciences perspectives. The 1986 resolution included a commitment to using this document to “promote congregational study of the complex issues of sexuality.”
- The Saskatoon and Purdue Resolutions on Human Sexuality, 1986-1987. Johns’ website prints both, side by side, with their editorial differences underlined.
- Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) Article 19 “Family, Singleness and Marriage.” This outlines understandings of sexuality, without explicit mention of or commentary on homosexuality.
- Stratford 1998 Resolution on the Issue of Homosexuality. The most recent delegate resolution officially accepted at a Canadian conference.
- Homosexuality and the Bible: A Case Study in the Use of the Bible for Ethics. This table reprints the biblical passages usually cited, and outlines how “accepting” and “rejecting” groups may understand their meaning. Note that the two “household tables” verses (1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10) are represented by the 1 Corinthians 6 comments.

Recent Books by Mennonites:

C. Norman Kraus, editor, To Continue the Dialogue: Homosexuality and Biblical Interpretation (Pandora U.S., 2001)

Willard Swartley, Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment (Herald, 2003)

3. Structure each session with a set of open questions such as the following:

A. What have we brought to this session?

Ask questions such as:

- What emotions, assumptions and perspectives do we each bring to this specific topic? (an individual exercise, with people invited to offer what they feel free to share.)
- If we wish to open ourselves to God's further truth, what (from these) might we want to hold onto, and what might we need to let go of?

B. What can we learn from this material?

As you consider this material (a biblical passage or article), ask questions such as:

- i. What (from this) did we already know when we started?
- ii. What puzzles or intrigues us from this material and from other participants? What new insights or questions are raised for us?
- iii. Such passages are part of a larger context. In the verses, paragraphs and chapters surrounding this selection, is there a larger point being made, or a pattern being illustrated? How might that under gird or qualify our understandings?
- iv. Who are the people, or types of people, we were privately relieved not to see here for this discussion? Would their observations, experiences or questions qualify or elaborate on our conclusions? If so, how could we ensure that we hear and factor in their perspectives?

C. How do our insights square with the Gospel's "weightier matters"?

Like the scribes and Pharisees, we share the human tendency to focus on this day's insight or practice, and to "neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." (Matt. 23:23) Scripture calls us to keep our eyes "turned toward Jesus" so that we can have "this mind within (us)" (Hebrews 12; Philippians 2).

- i. As we ponder today's learnings, what larger themes from the Gospel and from the life and ministry of Jesus would help keep our focus on those "weightier matters"? Ask one another questions such as:
 - a. Which Jesus stories (stories by or about Jesus) do we need to hear again (and which might we wish we could avoid)?
 - b. What larger themes of Scripture do we need to remind ourselves of once again? How will these under gird or qualify our understandings?
- ii. Considering this session's learnings in the light of the Gospel, what new thing may God be calling us to think and/or do differently from when we came to this meeting?

Background Materials from the "Joined in Faithfulness" documents, 2002

RECOMMENDATION #5

1. When any Congregation (A) perceives another Congregation (B) to be at variance with Mennonite Church Sask. self-definition, Congregation A is asked to engage in dialogue with Congregation B to gain understanding and build relationship. The Congregations are encouraged to involve the Conference Pastor in preparation for and engagement in dialogue.
2. When #1 does not resolve the matter, the Congregations are encouraged to involve a conference-appointed mediation/listening/facilitating committee to define the issue(s), create understanding, build relationship and seek resolution.
3. If, after #2 the Listening Committee, Executive and/or either Congregation deems it helpful, the involvement of the conference will be sought as follows:
 - a) A year of study in the congregations, including at least one study conference, facilitated by PLC or its designate;
 - b) At the subsequent annual meeting, a decision will be made on further action. This needs to include (but not be limited to):
 - i) Establish time frame(s) and further study if necessary;
 - ii) Determination of dissenting Congregation's status.

The above process was largely determined by and is to be implemented in the context of the following six principles:

1. The Conference must have and maintain a clear statement of its 'Confession of Faith'.
2. Whatever action is initiated must be in the context of relationship and taken in a way that maintains the integrity of relationship.
3. There must be constructive and ongoing dialogue across the Conference, between Congregations who disagree, and between Conference and Congregations.
4. The process must be given enough time to be thorough and careful, but there must be provision for closure within a reasonable length of time.
5. The Conference must take action including the limitations of some privileges for Congregations who decide to move outside the outline of beliefs held to be important and central (foundational) to Mennonite Church Saskatchewan.
6. The Conference not excommunicate any congregations.

RECOMMENDATION #6

That IV, 5(1) of the by-laws be changed to read:

Any congregation which supports the Mission Statement set out in part II and agrees with and adheres to the *Confession of Faith* as set out in Part

III and such other positional statements as the Conference may from time to time adopt, may become and/or remain a member congregation with full privileges.

Note: This Recommendation was referred to the By-law Committee for further action.

RECOMMENDATION #7 & #8

BE IT RESOLVED that at this time we as MC Sask affirm our understanding of Biblical sexuality as outlined in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, and expanded on by the Stratford '98 statement on this same matter. However, in light of differing understandings surrounding the topic of Homosexuality, MC Sask continue a "Season of Discernment" of not more than 4 years in which the General Council of MC Sask, or its designate, lead the Church in seeking God's will...

- i) in our response to gays and lesbians; and
- ii) in our response to congregations who accept into membership people in same-sex covenanted relationships.

Note: Recommendation #7 refers to a **Season of Discernment** in describing a period of four years in which MC Sask is to continue to seek an understanding of God's will where we at this point disagree. This disagreement centers on the place and role of people in same-sex covenanted relationships in our Congregations and Conference. The phrase "Season of Discernment" was deliberately chosen.

Season suggests a somewhat flexible yet defined time period for this discernment. **Discernment** suggests that God's Will has been made known, but we as God's people need to discover what that Will is. The intent is that in speaking to each other, listening carefully, and seeking the mind of God in prayer we will find a new sense of what is God-ly and a new will to be both united and diverse in a Spirit-inspired relationship of love.

The delegate body has asked the General Council of MC Sask to give careful leadership to making this **Season of Discernment** meaningful and helpful for all its member Congregations.

Sample Ground Rules

Note: *You may wish to have your group adopt and use this set, modify a set like this, or have your group develop their own set of ground rules. Once accepted or developed, these may be posted for all sessions.*

We will

1. Listen respectfully and carefully, without interrupting
2. Share time equitably so that each has opportunity to participate. (you may instead suggest "Wait to speak a second time on an issue until all have had a chance to speak the first time.)
3. Speak for ourselves, not for others. (e.g. "I think..." I feel...")
4. Attack the problem, not the person.
5. Keep what is shared in this discussion here within this room.