

# To Whom do I Go?: Congregational and Denominational Structures

## FOCUS

Scripture does not prescribe one specific church polity or government. At the same time, guidelines can be gleaned from both the Old and New Testaments. The priesthood and the temple in Israel's religious life are reminders of the importance of order ... The Apostle Paul asked the church to do all things decently and in order to build up the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 14:26, 40) (Article 16: Church Order and Unity," Commentary 1, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 1995, p. 63)

How important is order in the church? What does order look like, and who determines what order is? We all have experienced disorder in a whole range of settings. We know that a disorderly classroom makes learning difficult for the student and teaching impossible for the instructor. We may have been told at one time or another that our clothes are "disorderly." When crime takes over a neighborhood, we hear about the effects of that kind of disorder. But what is disorder in the church?

The Mennonite Church has, over the centuries, used a variety of structures for keeping order. Menno Simons speaks of the ministers and the elders keeping watch over the flock. In addition, the role of the bishop in keeping order was quite far-reaching in some regions and at some times. Miriam S. Lind recalls the bishop who would visit Filer Mennonite Church in Idaho this way:

In this room, at "Council Meeting" time, when the Bishop came from Oregon (twice a year) to make sure that everything was going all right (it usually wasn't), and to give communion to his little flock, he sat with the ministers as members of the church filed through, one at a time, testifying whether or not they were "at peace with God and man." (Miriam S. Lind, *Vignettes and Collages*, Copyright Miriam S. Lind, 1981, p. 176)

Today, the Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada have organized themselves with regional conferences. While only a few conferences still have bishops, many have replaced the bishop system with conference and regional ministers who are given the responsibility of oversight.

But no matter what form of order exists where you live, it is vitally important for every pastor or elder to understand the structure and the congregation's

place in it. You must be clear about FOR whom you are responsible and TO whom you are accountable. If you desire support, mentoring, and advocacy, this is key information. In times of decision-making or potential conflict in the congregation, it may even mean survival for you!

## **EXPLORE**

### THE HISTORY OF ELDERS IN THE BIBLE

#### 1. Tribal Structure

It is clear from the Old Testament that the name, *elder*, designated the head of a clan or tribe (2 Samuel 19:11). There must have been many elders since twice Moses chooses 70 from among them (Exodus 24:1).

Elders were quite powerful since they were responsible for decisions made for the tribe. It is the elders who make the decision to send the ark against the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4:3. It is the elders who demand the introduction of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8:4ff.

Even the kings were dependent on the goodwill of the elders. Saul pleaded with Samuel to go back with him to Gilgal so that he could worship the Lord even after God had removed the kingship from Saul and given it to Samuel. Why did he ask Samuel to come back with him? Saul did not want to be dishonored before the elders of his people and before Israel (1 Samuel 15:26-31).

#### 2. Jewish Religious Structure

Later, in the time of the Jewish synagogue, elders were appointed in a manner similar to the old clan or tribal elder. The Jewish Sanhedrin which we read about in the New Testament during the time of Christ was composed of 71 elders. Notice that the number in this group of religious leaders was patterned after the number which Moses chose to help him. This is the same group of elders who tried Christ in the house of the High Priest Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57). You will also remember that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of this council, called the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43).

#### 3. Early Church

In the beginning of the Church, there were not yet institutionalized or precisely-defined offices, especially in the earliest church known to Paul. So if we look to the New Testament to give us exact definitions of what an elder should do and what an elder should look like we will be disappointed.

Even the terms used in the New Testament are confusing. For example, sometimes the Greek word used for “elder” is also translated “bishop” or “overseer” or “pastor.” Therefore, these terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament to designate ordained members of a plural leadership group within the congregation.

Luke is the first to introduce the term, “presbyter,” to describe those who exercised leadership in the Christian church at Jerusalem. It is clear that this early group of believers used the Jewish synagogue pattern or the council of elders (Acts 11:29, 30; 21:17, 18).

Luke also mentions elders from the church at Ephesus. It appears that elders were a vital part of early church organization (Acts 20:17). In fact, it is worth noting that elders were considered essential to the growth and maintenance of each new congregation. In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas do not leave Lystra until they have appointed elders.

However, we notice a significant change when we come to the pastoral epistles, especially in Paul's writings to Timothy and Titus. By the time these letters were written, the charismatic structure of the early church, where the focus was on the allocation and use of gifts, had given way to an organized system of offices. In Paul's letter to Timothy, the office of elder was assumed and is described as worthy of honor (1 Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5).

#### WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE ELDERS?

"I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge" (1 Peter 5:1, 2). With these words, Peter designates elders as the ones responsible to care for the members and the life of the church. That is a rather far-reaching job description. But within the elders' group, there were those identified to preach and teach (1 Timothy 5:17) and those who prophesy (1 Timothy 4:14). Overall the role of the elder broadly identified the entire leadership group within each congregation.

This differed from the role of deacons, who were chosen specifically to distribute alms to the poor and widowed on behalf of the church (Acts 6:1-6).

#### HOW DID ELDERS WORK?

It appears as if elders worked together collaboratively and collegially. Even though individuals were chosen for specific elder tasks, all worked together. This is best illustrated by the shared healing ministry in James 5:14: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."

1. Draw a time line for your current congregation, depicting the change in leadership patterns over the years. You may need to do some research into your congregation's history by checking the historical archives and speaking with older members of the congregation.

**Remember to include any of the following that are applicable:**

- pastors ordained by lot
- the first paid pastor employed
- first church council
- first elders group
- all leadership persons or staff
- other important events involving church leadership

2. What did you learn in this exercise? What trends do you see from the past that may be affecting current leadership?

3. Now draw a diagram depicting the current leadership patterns in your congregation. Include the persons from conference who are responsible



for oversight of the congregation.

4. What observations about your structure can you make after completing this exercise?

## CONNECT

### PASTOR/ELDER ROLE CONFUSION

The most common form of Mennonite Church order in the beginning of the 1900's was "the bench." Behind the pulpit, the bishop, pastors, and deacon(s) sat on the bench. These men (and they were all men) worked together even though the hierarchy among them was clear. It was the bench who made ALL the major decisions for the congregation. In the former General Conference Mennonite Church, the leadership group was comprised of the Aeltester (elder), minister, and deacons. In Canada, one additional leadership group existed in the form of unpaid lay ministers. However, the demise of the bench and the introduction of the paid pastorate brought enormous changes. These changes coincided with the cultural mindset of the 1960's which advocated equality for all. Pastors became more facilitators than leaders.

During the same time period, the advent of church councils confused the role of elders/deacons. Church councils assumed much of the previous administrative duties of elders/deacons. The role of the elders, then, moved to the tasks of pastoral evaluation, supervision, and salary negotiation. Elders as ministering persons became passé.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, changes in congregational structure have continued. Churches are forming congregational ministry teams consisting of pastors and lay leaders or elders. The important role of oversight is being reestablished.

Assisted by *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (1996), the church is moving toward a convergence between the traditions of the former General Conference and Mennonite Church traditions. This new order is shaped by a threefold ministry tradition: ministries of oversight; pastoral leadership; and some form of lay leadership, with authority being equally vested in all three groups. See the book; *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (1996), read "Theological Background," pp. 12-31

From 1989 to 1991, seventeen congregations from the former General Conference Mennonite Church and the former Mennonite Church were chosen to participate in a study called The Pastorate Project to discover the crunch points in church leadership today. A variety of congregations were chosen: large and small; rural and urban; with a history of conflict and with no such history; with clearly-defined pastoral roles and where the pastor sat in the circle with the congregation. The purpose of this study was to discover, in the day-to-day life of congregations, why so many pastors were leaving the ministry and/or burning out.

Two significant findings stand out from the Pastorate Project:

1) Pastors are standing alone. In times of conflict this sense of solitariness is accentuated. If any discomfort surfaces between the pastor and the congregation, the elders almost always move back toward the congregation. After all, pastors can come and go, but elders will likely have to continue to live with the people in the pews for the rest of their lives.

2) There is considerable confusion and disagreement over the role of elder in the congregation. Elders seem to be caught between two roles. On the one hand, they feel as if they are to serve as congregational representatives to the pastor. On the other hand, they feel as if they are to serve in leadership. Hence elders can be caught between trying to please the congregation and trying to support the pastor.

The implications of these findings are:

1. For the Pastor:

- a. Partly because of ambivalence about strong leadership in the larger culture and partly because of a misunderstanding of the concept of “servant leadership” in the Anabaptist heritage, pastors find it difficult to be creative, assertive, and purposeful leaders.
- b. The range of expectations assumed by pastors and congregations is often unrealistically broad and sometimes requires mutually incompatible gifts. Leaders and congregations need to arrive at a clear consensus on focused expectations.

2. For Elders

- a. Working under a “lay board/staff” model adopted from larger organizations and less appropriate to congregational functioning, elders frequently see themselves as employers of ministers rather than as persons who engage in specific ministries that support and complement the work of the pastor. Many elder boards pick up the tasks usually assigned to employers. It is often the elders who negotiate salary with the pastor. It is often the elders who conduct the pastoral evaluation. So the question becomes: How can you minister together as one leadership team if you are also the employer or the board who manages the pastor?
- b. With the frequent turnover and a “lay” self image, there is little expectation or encouragement for elders to engage in training for the development of their gifts as they are used in the context of different congregational settings within which they have to exercise their important leadership ministries.

5. List all the responsibilities and tasks of the elders/deacons in your congregation.
6. Identify which of these responsibilities reflect administrative ministry and which reflect caring ministry.
7. Does the pastor in your congregation receive support and supervision from the elders? How is this working? Why is it or why is it not working? Give a specific example to support your answer.



In your congregation, what is the relationship between the elders and the pastor(s)? Does the role include both supporting and acting as an employer of the pastor? How is this working? Why or why not? Give an example to support your answer.

8. As you read the results of the Pastorate Project, how would you like to see the role of elders changed in your congregation?
9. Do you have both an elders' group and a church council in your congregation? How would you differentiate between their roles? Give a brief description of the role of each of these groups (if you have them).

## APPLY

The question returns: To whom is the pastor accountable? *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* indicates that persons in pastoral ministry develop multiple accountability relationships. They are accountable to elders/deacons, church chair and council/board, and persons providing oversight. See the book, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, read, "Ethics in Ministry," pp 106-127.

So far we have not discussed the relationship of the pastor to the conference minister or the person providing oversight. Oversight should give nurture, reference, counsel and support to the pastor. This relationship is especially important during times of pastoral review, transition, and establishing a Covenant of Understanding/Memo of Agreement between the pastor and the congregation. The person providing oversight can also give invaluable counsel and direction for the pastor when facing new challenges. Therefore, it is the wise pastor who is willing to receive such oversight and assistance from the conference staff and works to build ongoing relationships with persons in such positions.



10. Describe the accountability structure for your congregation in comparison to what you read in *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, read, "Ethics in Ministry," pp 106-108.
11. Who provides oversight for the pastor in your congregation?
12. What agreements have been made with the person providing oversight regarding:
  - a. How often to meet.
  - b. The appropriate agenda for the meetings.
  - c. What the person providing oversight expects from the pastor.
  - d. What the pastor expect from the person providing oversight.
  - e. Give an example of one time when this person's assistance was helpful to the pastor and congregation.
13. What would you expect to gain or learn from a supervisory or oversight relationship and experience?

14. Answer the following questions:

- a. Your congregation is a member of what conference?
- b. What conference holds the ministerial credentials for pastors in your congregation?
- c. Who is the conference minister who relates to your congregation?
- d. In what ways does your congregation relate to the conference?
- e. How has conference been helpful to your congregation and/or you?
- f. In what areas could conference be more helpful?



### Readings

See book, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, as a reference for Lesson Nine questions