

Journeying Together as Followers of the Prince of Peace

(An open letter from the USMB Board of Faith and Life)

March, 2013

Dear US Mennonite Brethren Church Family,

The Board of Faith and Life (BFL) for the USMB Conference met March 13 and 14, 2013 in San Diego. A major agenda item was to assess the outcomes of the January 24-26 Study Conference in Phoenix (Kingdom Citizens in a World of Conflict). This communication is to provide an update for those who were present there and to bring into the conversation those who were not. It is our attempt to communicate what led us to that conference, to report on what happened there, and to share our plans for continued processing of the issues addressed there. At the Study Conference as well as outside it, we have heard a strong call for at least some revisions to Article 13 of our Confession of Faith, the article currently called "Love and Nonresistance." This letter is our call to our entire MB church family to participate in a confessional revision process.

What Led Us To Phoenix?

Throughout its history the Mennonite Brethren Church has identified itself as a Peace Church, and has been part of the Anabaptist family of churches. Also throughout its history, we have been influenced strongly (more strongly than some other Mennonite groups) by broader Evangelical and Pietistic movements and influences. Though all previous Confessions of Faith have clearly stated that we do not practice violence in any form, and that in particular we do not participate in the military, it has been clear for a long time that this conviction, strongly held by many of us, does not represent the viewpoint of all of us, nor even all of our leaders.

For years, we as a BFL have heard people calling for us to "do something." For some people "do something" means calling all of us to line up our convictions and actions with what our current Confession of Faith says. For others "do something" means removing from our confessional statement specific sentences which do not truly say "what Mennonite Brethren believe." For still others "do something" means broadening the scope of our peacemaking emphasis beyond military considerations. For BFL "do something" meant first and foremost gathering us together to study the Scriptures, hear prepared papers, respond and process them together, and gather feedback that would help us discern next steps. That is what led us to Phoenix.

The overwhelming feedback of those who participated was that this was a good idea and that the event was helpful. The feedback also clearly indicated that the Study Conference was only a beginning. We must now discern together what it means to be a church family that confesses a commitment to peacemaking, but does not always agree on what that means.

The Study Conference Itself

We invited to the Study Conference District Boards of Faith and Life, pastors, other leaders and all persons of our churches. About 150 US MBs plus about 25 others responded to the invitation. The Study Conference centered around five major presentations, each followed by a prepared response, table conversations and open mike processing of the issues. The five papers focused on Articles 12 and 13 of our Confession of Faith and on what it means to be a Peace Church that does not agree on exactly what that implies. In addition we worshipped together, studied specific Scriptures, heard devotionals, conversed about peacemaking initiatives, heard reports and presentations by various agencies and sister conferences and prayed and celebrated communion together.

We also collected a lot of feedback which we will post on our website.

What We Have Already Done Since the Study Conference

Since the Study Conference we have made available on the US MB website the scripts of all the presentations and responses. We have also initiated a discussion forum where all are encouraged to keep the conversation going.

As a Board of Faith and life we sifted through about 80 pages of feedback produced by the participants in the Study Conference (in addition to scripts of all the presentations and responses). The data included a tabulation of table conversation notes, notes written by individuals in response to individual presentations, and especially answers to questions posed by BFL in a final questionnaire. That information proved to be enormously helpful to us in planning steps forward from here.

In another questionnaire, some of the data we collected was submitted to us confidentially and we will honor our commitment. The most helpful information we collected and collated were the responses to the questionnaire administered on the last morning of the Study Conference. Very shortly we will be posting all the responses to this questionnaire (without names or identifiers, so as to preserve confidentiality). We invite others to examine the responses of participants and we encourage you to communicate with us, if you wish, as to what you think that feedback implies.

Meanwhile we have also done some important research, in particular on the role or potential role confessional statements have had and could have today in the process of applying for conscientious objector status in times of national conscription. The results of that research will also be posted for broader examination and assessment.

Considering a Revision of Article 13

BFL spent considerable time at our March 13-14 meetings conversing together and prayerfully seeking God's guidance on how best to move forward with possible confessional revision. Our commitment is to lead a process that results in a statement that we can broadly affirm as a Mennonite Brethren church family. We want to be able to *confess together with integrity*. We understand that to mean:

1. Integrity with what the Scriptures teach (recognizing that we do not all reach the same conclusions on that);
2. Integrity with what we publicly claim (recognizing that some of us want specific behavioral implications of a call to peacemaking to be stated and others do not);
3. Integrity with the International Community of Mennonite Brethren and other peace churches (recognizing both the value of our historical roots and the need for ongoing discernment).

With these goals in mind, we have begun to formulate what we think a revised confessional statement might say. We anticipate a revision of Article 13 of our Confession of Faith, and possibly inconsequential changes to Article 12. At the very earliest it could be considered by the national convention in 2014, though much public conversation about this would take place between now and then.

The goal of a revised statement is not finding some lowest common denominator that we can all agree on. On the contrary, we hope to challenge all of us to study diligently and think deeply about what it means to be a "peace church." We are committed to being a church family within the Anabaptist family of churches that maintains a commitment to radical peacemaking in obedience to Christ, even if we do not all agree on exactly what that implies.

We have heard a strong call, both at the Study Conference and outside it, to maintain a strong commitment to peacemaking. And we heard contradictory statements on what that should or should not include. Because of the diversity of beliefs among us, it is obvious that no statement will say exactly what every person, or even every leader, might prefer. But we are hopeful that a revised confessional statement can help us remain committed to following the Prince of Peace, even while continuing to challenge each other and ourselves in discerning what that means and then following through in obedience.

Next Steps

Having begun the process of evaluating the outcomes of our Study Conference, we now invite our national church family to join that conversation. We invite all who read this communication to reflect on its implications and then if you have feedback and/or advice, to send it to us. Please contact us at either larrynikkel@tabor.edu or ebed@usmb.org.

Meanwhile, we will be arranging meetings that bring members of the national BFL together with District Boards of Faith and Life. The purpose of these meetings is to design a good confessional revision process, solicit input from each district including its pastors, and test possible formulations of a revised Article 13.

We will also be arranging meetings with others in the Bible faculties of our colleges and Seminary. These meetings will be designed to help us craft the kind of Confessional Statement that meets the goals we have set.

If individual churches or groups of individual MB's would like to invite members of BFL to meet with us so that you can advise us or to facilitate your own conversations about these matters, please invite us to do so.

The BFL will carefully process input from all these communications and gatherings and will then publicize a draft of a revised Article 13 for testing broadly in our churches. Exactly how that testing will take place is part of what we are asking District Boards of Faith and Life to help us discern.

Calling Us All to a Vigorous and Peaceful Process

One of the stated goals of the Study Conference in Phoenix was “To create an atmosphere of trust and safety for exploring what we believe Jesus is saying to us on these important matters.” Those in attendance at the Study Conference strongly affirmed that we achieved that goal. As a Board we are very grateful for broad participation in the Study Conference and especially for the fact that we could spend days together conversing openly and honestly about very important issues – issues on which many people hold strong convictions – and to do so in an atmosphere of trust and safety. Now we invite our entire national church family to enter a process that dialogues vigorously about these things, that speaks candidly, that shares diverse viewpoints with conviction and passion, and yet does so in an atmosphere of trust and safety, where we listen with respect to divergent viewpoints. As a board we are committed to leading a process designed to unify, clarify, affirm and challenge. We want integrity to characterize the process and the outcome. We invite your participation in finding the best way forward.