

Sanctuary: Where we maintain the unity of the Spirit

Nancy Kauffmann

In Ephesians 4:1–3 Paul implores the Gentiles at Ephesus to demonstrate “all humility and gentleness . . . , making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Two thousand years later, we love the words but struggle to put them into practice when the current conflict happens to be one we’re dead certain we’re right about.

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Like other denominations, the Mennonite church always has had and always will have conflicts. Two have dominated in recent decades.

Conflict #1: Women in ministry

My ministry began at College Mennonite Church (CMC) in Goshen, Indiana, in 1981, during the early days of the debate about

women in ministry. At that time only a handful of women in the entire denomination had been credentialed as pastors. Because the term *ordination* seemed to be a sticking point for many, CMC chose to abandon the word *ordained* and instead adopted the word *commissioned*, redefining the latter word to mean “called to serve the church with all the rights and privileges of an ordained pastor.”

To further defuse controversy, CMC decided to do my installation in a leaderless worship service that unofficially (without the presence of a conference representative) “commissioned” all members of the congregation for roles, from elder to usher. In a worship service held on September 27, 1981, participants (those commissioned and those to be commissioned) followed along with a twelve-page liturgy in which designated members stood on written cue and the other members proceeded to read aloud their commissioning statement.

When it came time for my installation, the only apparent difference was that I went forward and stood—alone—in front of the congregation, while they read the words of commissioning to me. Because I was the mother of two young children, it had taken me six years to earn my MDiv degree. On the long-anticipated day that marked the beginning of my ministry, all I remember feeling was loneliness, embarrassment, and sadness.

Time has softened my perspective on this event. While I still may wish it had been a more meaningful service (many church members have since apologized for it), I realize that discerning big issues within the church is often a messy and slow process, and sometimes a painful one.

It helped that Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference set up a formal process for discernment about the issue of women in ministry, one that had integrity. They developed study materials and encouraged each member congregation to spend time studying the resource before voting on the issue.

Our annual session in 1980 was marked by passionate and sometimes heated debate among the delegates. When some congregations requested more time to study, the moderator and most of the delegates agreed.

The vote that finally passed the next year did not specifically validate ordaining women for ministry, but it detailed the characteristics of a minister, acknowledged that God gives gifts to women, too, and granted each congregation authority to decide who (of whatever gender) its ministers would be.

As a woman minister, this agreement was not all I had hoped for, but I could be at peace with it. It gave congregations space to live out their understanding of scripture while remaining in fellowship with congregations with different views about women in ministry. As a woman I still faced occasional opposition at conference gatherings, and even in the congregation where I served, but the resolution allowed the conference to move on to other issues.

Conflict #2: Homosexuality

About twelve years later, the issue of homosexuality surfaced in Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, and in the denomination as a whole, when a congregation brought their struggles to

the executive board of the conference and asked for counsel. The board, following protocol, again took the matter to the delegates.

But rather than bringing us together, the debate seemed to push members and congregations further apart. Congregations and individuals who advocated openness to homosexual members called for dialogue, citing statements on the issue adopted at churchwide assemblies in Purdue (1987) and Saskatoon (1986).

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Those who felt that scripture clearly identifies homosexuality as a sin said there was nothing to debate. They saw the call for dialogue as an attempt to wear them down with arguments until they finally gave in. Advocates for dialogue saw this refusal to talk as rooted not in faith but in fear.

Impatience and mistrust grew, and conference leaders felt pressure to take action against any congregation not holding the denomination's position, even those that had not taken in a gay or lesbian member but were only considering it. This issue and the pain and mistrust that accompanied it dominated conference life for a decade. Leadership was hammered from both sides.

When I joined the conference staff in 2000, this issue still had the conference in a death grip. It sapped our creativity and energy and kept us from becoming the mission-minded conference we wanted to be.

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Reflecting on these conflicts

As I watch the debate on homosexuality again heating up across the church, I reflect back on these two experiences. While both issues continue to cause conflict, the practice of ordaining women for ministry has generally gained some acceptance over the years,

while debate about homosexuality still threatens to divide our denomination. I recognize that the conflicts are different, yet I believe we can gain some insight by reviewing how Indiana Michigan conference (and perhaps other conferences as well) approached these two conflicts.

The similarities. I see the key similarities in these two conflicts as follows: People began each debate being intensely passionate about a particular outcome. Each issue could have torn the conference and the broader church apart. Some congregations left—because of a decision made about women in ministry, and because of the lack of decisiveness about homosexuality. Both issues engendered—and still engender—fear. Both groups wanting change were told to be patient. Both groups holding to the existing position were accused of being bigoted rather than biblical. At times the words and example of Jesus seemed to be the last verses from scripture invoked in the conflict, rather than the first ones.

The differences. It is the differences, I believe, that have defined the varied outcomes.

While some saw women in ministry as disobedient to God's intent, few labeled their desire to minister as sin. Such labeling quickly emerged in the debate about homosexuality. The conflict about women in ministry included Bible study, discussion at various levels, prayer, and a search for common ground that would allow space for some disagreement in thought and behavior. While the delegates expected leaders to design a process for congregational use, to guide the discussion, the delegates expected to eventually shape and discern an action. By contrast, in the early days of the homosexuality debate, little or no agreement emerged about a process that would lead to discernment.

On women in ministry, the conference-wide decision gave congregations autonomy to decide how they would handle the issue. The member congregations chose to respect the decisions of their sister congregations, giving them the benefit of the doubt and trusting that all seek to be faithful to God. In the conflict around homosexuality, some congregations called on the conference to discipline any church considering openness to gay members.

The decision regarding women in ministry was made by the delegates and not by conference leaders. On homosexuality, some

voices pressed conference leadership to act unilaterally and impose a decision from the top.

Perhaps most importantly, those debating the issue of women in ministry sought a unity of the Spirit, while the homosexuality debate often seemed more focused on enforcing conformity in a false unity.

Two key scriptures

Such debates would be easy if scripture provided unambiguous answers to every conflict we face.

On women in ministry, do we claim Galatians 3:27–28—“In Christ there is neither male nor female”—or do we follow Paul’s comment that women should be silent in the church (1 Cor. 14: 34–35)? Along with the teachings of Jesus, which should always be foundational, there are two passages that I believe can help guide our way through the issues.

The first is Ephesians 4:1–6, which calls us “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to *maintain the unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (my emphasis). Here we are told unambiguously what we are called to, what characteristics we are to display, what we are to do, and the reason why we are to do these things. The call is to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. The characteristics are humility, gentleness, and patience. The activity in the call is to bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We are to do this because there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

The call to “maintain the unity of the Spirit” acknowledges that this unity is not our creation but a gift given by God through the Holy Spirit. And it is not a gift given unconditionally but one we must keep working at through discernment.

So how do we live together when we do the things called for in Ephesians 4 and we still disagree? I find guidance for that in a

second passage: the Lord's Prayer. We have all prayed many times: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Here in an amazing reversal, God is not calling on us; we are calling on God for God's plan to be put into place among us just as it is in heaven.

But for that to happen, we must be ready to pray and humbly work not for what we want but for what God desires! To pray this prayer means to open ourselves to God's leading and shaping of us by the Holy Spirit.

What might God's will look like, then? What visible shape might it take? One of my favorite images comes from a seminary professor who said, "Sanctuary is where heaven and earth meet, where everyday assumptions and rationalizations are broken open like the frail elements they are, in order to reveal a more inclu-

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sive, just, empowering, and satisfying truth through the presence of the sacred." I find a satisfying richness in the image of God's will for our church being a sanctuary, a safe place where heaven and earth intersect.

Just imagine having a safe place where we could without recrimination do a self-awareness check of our behaviors, motives, and attitudes. We could work at how we interact with one another, how we talk to one another, how

we listen to one another, how we make decisions, and how we give grace to one another, just as God is daily giving all of us grace. It would mean accepting that God—not the conference or the denomination—is the final authority on who is in and who is out.

Sanctuary isn't some remote oasis where we quietly abide until heaven beckons. It is a marketplace where we can encounter and embrace the messiness of discernment, a place where we wrestle with the issues of life in the presence of God. And it is not a place of mindless and spiritless conformity. In fact the very image of sanctuary has diversity built into it: the opposites of heaven and earth, sky and land, Holy Spirit and flawed flesh.

As our confession of faith confirms, it is by the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the church comes to unity in doctrine and action. It will be the Holy Spirit who calls us to clarity and repentance

when necessary. And it will be the Holy Spirit who leads us into the will of God. Here in this sanctuary we yield ourselves and our conflicts to the Holy Spirit, as we seek not a cloned sameness but the unity of the Spirit in which our rich diversity finds its proper expression.

Four clarifying questions

On a beautiful November Saturday that looked much like a physical manifestation of spiritual sanctuary, the Illinois Mennonite Conference gathered for a day of discernment. Building on past learnings, they did all the right things: studied scripture, prayed together, talked together, and celebrated together.

Did they come to a final resolution? No. But what they did accomplish is what I believe gives this issue and our denomination hope. They affirmed their common faith in God and their theological understandings about what God is calling them to do. They laid a foundation for how they wanted to interact with each other. They expressed a willingness to trust each other and God. They sat across the table and worked out what they could agree on. They gave themselves space to breathe and allow the Spirit to work on them and in them.

At the end of the day, Chuck Neufeld, conference minister, suggested four questions that should be asked of both sides who have come into conflict: Is Jesus Christ Lord and Savior in your life and in your congregation? Is scripture authoritative for your life? Is the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective* your foundation?¹ Are you gathering as a people of faith to pray for and discern the Holy Spirit's guidance? Neufeld maintains that if we can answer yes to these questions, then we can sit down together and find our way through anything.

A time to move forward

If we can answer all these questions in the affirmative, will our conflicts disappear? Will we move forward in the same way, and with all the congregations we have had in the past?

Not necessarily. As our history and that of Christianity as a whole demonstrate, there are many legitimate ways to be part of God's kingdom, and sometimes going our separate ways is how we resolve conflict and give breathing space to each other. Jesus says

in John 14:2 that within God's house, there are many rooms. When we separate, we may just be moving to a different room within God's dwelling.

Our goal, then, should not be to impose conformity, or even to keep members from leaving, but to maintain the unity of God's Spirit, wherever that might lead or whatever shape it might take. That is hard work. It is messy and often frustrating. But God created diversity and had to know that disagreements, new challenges and ongoing issues, would result from that diversity. God must have wanted an alive and dynamic creation that interacts with God and with the other parts of creation to discover the richness of life.

Three decades of wisdom

After three decades of ministry at the congregational, conference, and denominational levels, I sometimes think I know less about what it takes to resolve church conflicts than when I was fresh out of seminary. Can we hold to a theological center that allows for flexibility at the edges? Can we maintain the unity of the Spirit rather than a spirit of unity that often becomes a smothering conformity? Is it even possible?

I believe we will fail if we

- focus on our disagreements rather than on the foundational beliefs we have in common;
- assume we know what the other is thinking instead of sitting down with the other and fully listening until we understand their point of view;
- think we have the corner on the truth;
- aren't willing to study scripture together;
- aren't open to the Spirit of God moving within and through us;
- distance ourselves from others while we discern on our own;
- threaten to walk away or withhold money to force the other's hand;
- use negative adjectives to describe the behaviors, beliefs, motives, and language of others; or
- expect leaders to impose a decision on those with whom we disagree.

I believe we can succeed if we

- allow God to manage the conflict;
- understand that God is the final judge in our disputes;
- act with humility and offer an open heart and hands to God and each other;
- are clear about the center of what unites us and take time to reflect on that core;
- pray for each other and for ourselves;
- study scripture together;
- wait on the Lord and give the Spirit time to work on us;
- assume that others are trying, as we are, to be faithful to God;
- offer others the same love and grace that God has showered on us; and
- are not afraid to be wrong.

Our denomination holds us together with the foundational theology laid out in the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective*, affirmed at the 1995 assembly of delegates from Canada and U.S. But we must decide whether to use this document as an encircling arm or as a hammer. As conflicts arise, can we allow congregations and conferences—as they rely on this document, on scripture, and on the counsel of fellow believers—to discern where they will stand, even though we might disagree with them? Then we can continue in fellowship and communication, together creating a sanctuary that may produce not conformity but something far better and more biblical: the unity of God’s Spirit.

Note

¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995).

About the author

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