

Embracing Faithfulness, Discerning Our Differences
Report to Conference Council
October 2004

Mandate and Process.

The Conference Council of Virginia Mennonite Conference created a task force with the mandate “to review Virginia Mennonite Conference processes in dealing with differences of theology and practice, and bring a report to Conference Council...”¹ The task force was comprised of Pearl Hoover, chairperson, Yvonne Bailey, Glendon Blosser, Monica Hochstedler, Ray Hurst, Clyde Kratz, and Owen Burkholder (staff).

The task force wrestled for a number of meetings on the specific name of our group. We chose the “Embracing Faithfulness” portion as an affirmation of our deep desire for the people of God to acknowledge and pursue faithfulness in our life together. “Discerning our differences” was selected to recognize that our life together as a people of God is a deliberate process of reflecting on what differences exist and the source of those differences. The acknowledgement of differences sets the stage for reviewing those differences in relationship to biblical and confessional materials. When we are aware of our human experiences and the breadth of our beliefs, we must then discern how we relate to each other when we understand each other well.

The task force engaged in a review of four specific cases that had the appearance of Virginia Mennonite Conference constituency engaged in social change that would affect their belief and practice. The four cases were selected because of the perception that leaders of Virginia Conference engaged in significant leadership activities that involved discernment, group processing, theological clarification and informed the practice of ministry in a new way. The following cases were selected: divorce/remarriage, women in pastoral leadership, church membership and participation in the military, and the process of the removal of Broad Street Mennonite Church.

In our work as a task force, we wrestled at length and continually over how to label the process related to the removal of Broad Street. On the one hand, we were tempted to identify “homosexual practice” as the key theme of social change. However, there was no evidence for a request to change the theological rationale associated with sexual ethics of being a follower of Jesus, nor was there any evidence of a request for a specific change in ministry practice. On the other hand, we were not prepared to investigate the breadth of the theme “church discipline” as a means of controlling social change in Virginia Conference. Therefore, even in the midst of our uneasiness of labeling the fourth issue “Broad Street,” we recognize that this congregation is the theme of the case study.

¹ Conference Council minutes of Virginia Mennonite Conference, January 24-25, 2003.

In order to learn about these four cases, members of the task force reviewed minutes of Faith and Life Council, minutes of Virginia Conference Assembly, and other documentation that provided insight into understanding the process of discernment that occurred. On some occasions, interviews were conducted with individuals that were involved in the discernment process. Finally, our task force benefited from the collective memory of Glendon Blosser and Owen Burkholder.

Task force members were assigned specific cases to research. The primary questions applied to each case study are:

- Where did the process being?
- Who was involved?
- Who were the main actors?
- What gave them the right to act?
- What was the theological question involved in this issue?
- What was the level of anxiety in Virginia Conference?
- Where were the parallel issues in the broader Mennonite Church?
- How long did the process take?

These questions gave many opportunities to engage vigorously the merits and practice of discernment in Virginia Mennonite Conference.

We want to acknowledge that for each case study we arbitrarily set the boundaries to limit the scope of our investigation. Therefore, our investigation of information for each case study varies in the scope of gathered information. For example, we began looking at divorce and remarriage with the earliest account of Mennonites in Virginia wrestling with this issue. When we came to the membership and military issue, we arbitrarily chose the Warwick District's invitational adventure to explore social change on this matter. In this case, we did not review each time Virginia Mennonite Conference sought to discern issues associated with our peace theology.

On the Broad Street case, we reviewed Virginia Conference's encounter with Broad Street in the most recent episode versus reviewing all Broad Street's attempts at social change as a member of Virginia Conference. The later research would have required consideration of Broad Street's adventure in race relationships, their urging consideration of women in ministry, the theological commitment and practice of the "priesthood of all believers" which removes the importance of ordination of a primary pastor, their theological commitments about Christology that lead to a term of probation in the Harrisonburg District of Virginia Mennonite Conference, and other social adventures they have engaged in over the course of their relationship with Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Case Studies.

Divorce and Remarriage.

The case study dealing with Divorce and Remarriage is the broadest historical scope. As early as 1867, Mennonites in Virginia held a conversation about divorce and remarriage. The clergy had gathered for a conference and the matter emerged from a visiting bishop. In the conversation, it became apparent that the ministers of Virginia were at ease with remarriage when the divorce was caused by marital unfaithfulness. When the position espoused by the Virginia Mennonite clergy reached other portions of the church, there was opposition to their understanding. At the next meeting of conference in April 1868, the clergy of Virginia Mennonites discussed the broader church response to their position and decided not to vote on the matter. Granting permission for divorce and remarriage when infidelity was present remained their ministry position until the turn of the century.

The teaching position of the church on marriage has been one man and one woman for life. The primary pastoral issue was associated church membership for persons who experienced a failure of marriage and the subsequent divorce and remarriage. Persons who experienced divorce and remarriage could not be members of local congregations in the leadership discernment that occurred in 1914, 1935, 1941, 1950, and 1961.

Virginia Conference leaders dealt with the issue in 1961 by developing a statement “Approaches for dealing advisedly on the part of the church with persons involved in divorce and remarriage.” This statement was to be “a statement of guiding principles...” In the 1970’s, two conferences dealt with this issue. A shift in process is noted in the 1974 conference session. “Each case should be approached with love and patience... we feel that some liberty must be given and confidence must be placed in each district administration to deal wisely with each case which comes for consideration. In difficult situations district leaders are encouraged to seek counsel of the Conference Council on Faith and Life...”

By the 1980’s, the issue of divorce and remarriage was now emerging in relationship to dealing with church leaders who had a failed marriage and were being remarried. On this occasion, there is a reaffirmation of the teaching position of the church on marriage and a process is laid out for working with persons where “restoration of a given marriage is no longer an option.” The tone of their concern is seen in the following statement:

We recognize that not all scholars, pastors, and congregations are at the same place in their understanding of how the Bible would require the Church to deal with individuals involved in the various issues covered by this paper. We urge that all continue in prayer, study, and searching to find the mind of the Spirit in these matters; that we continue to engage one another in dialogue in the spirit of brotherly concern; and that we respect the integrity of our brothers and sisters in any congregation whose decision and action may be different than our own, within the understanding of Virginia Conference procedures.

The following observations are offered from the review of historical material.

1. Congregational leaders who were facing the situation in their congregations raised the issue of divorce and remarriage persistently. In the early stages of this discussion, the persons experiencing divorce and remarriage were coming into the church as new believers. In this period, the question hinged on whether the divorces/remarriages were before conversion. More recently, the issue is raised because of members of the congregation who are experiencing divorce and remarriage. The most recent discussions on divorce and remarriage are seeking to clarify the leadership role a person can hold having experienced marital failure and remarriage.
2. There was interaction with leaders of other conferences throughout the denomination to see how the issue was being addressed elsewhere in the church. There were significant differences between conferences at some points along the way.
3. The biblical ideal is cited in every study. Interpretations of “exception clauses” and the balancing of restriction and freedom principles in the scriptures directly affected pastoral applications.
4. Beginning in 1974, clergy and lay persons review the church position on divorce and remarriage. The questions and study processes related to divorce/remarriage were considered by the delegate body (credentialed leaders only) until 1974. In a “special session” of conference, a revised constitution was adopted that provided for congregational delegates that could include lay persons. The revised constitution also established a “Council on Faith & Life” which was composed of the bishops/overseers. This same session of conference adopted some summary statements on divorce/remarriage that included this counsel: “In difficult situations district leaders are encouraged to seek the counsel of the Conference Council on Faith and Life.”
5. Beginning in 1961, the approved documents are called, “approaches,” or “guidelines,” with the recognition that there would be differences of application between districts. There is the call in 1983, to “respect the integrity of our brothers and sisters in any congregation whose decision and action may be different than our own, within the understanding of Virginia Conference procedures.”
6. The 1983 document (current) gives the primary responsibility for process to congregations with assistance from the overseer.

Women in Pastoral Leadership.

A woman in pastoral leadership has historical precedence in Virginia Conference. In 1861, a Virginia Mennonite Conference bishop asked “the conference to choose by voice vote women to be ordained as deaconesses to help him in the work of the church.” Deaconesses were never given “official voice” in the decision-making aspects of the conference or congregations. Women as assembly delegates were first recognized in Virginia in 1974 following the revision of the constitution that provided for congregational delegates. Virginia Mennonite Conference credentialed its first woman in 1986 with over forty-five women credentialed in VMC since then.

The primary impetus for social change on women in pastoral leadership occurs with denominational discernment. In 1971, at the first General Assembly of the Mennonite Church,

conference leaders were invited “to submit issues needing attention.” The role of women was high on the resulting list. The 1973 Assembly considered a document titled, “Women in the Church.” This was circulated for further study and a 1975 report indicated two approaches were to be found throughout the church on this issue. “Leadership and Authority in the Church” was the next study with a summary document accepted in 1981. Over the next number of years conferences in Illinois ordained a woman (1973), Southwest adopted guidelines to ordain a woman (1978) and Lancaster Conference (1979) adopted a statement that provided guidance to commission “women for the sharing of their gifts in meeting the needs of the congregations and the community under the supervision of local leadership.”

Virginia Mennonite Conference’s process on women in pastoral leadership began with the Council of Faith and Life (CFL). At a leadership retreat in 1980, CFL acknowledged, “that in recent years we have been slow to recognize the gifts of our sisters and to make a place in the program of the church for these gifts to be exercised.” In 1983, CFL determined that it should make a study of the ordination of women “before there was a specific request.” By May, there was a request from a congregation for such a study. The subsequent studies of the biblical text and a growing intensity around the issue led to a CFL statement in May 1984 that said, “The service of women in the ministry as pastors is a step which we have been considering carefully. With our present understandings, we will consider requests for the licensing or ordination of women for diaconate ministries. In light of the continuing theological discussions we feel that we cannot at this time consider requests for the licensing or ordination of women to the office of pastor.” This followed a conference on women in leadership held in the Harrisonburg area that created some controversy.

The role of women in the family and in leadership becomes the subject of conference discernment. In conference assembly in 1984 a study document was presented on the theme “Clarifying Female and Male Roles in the Christian Family.” The discussion indicated that work needed to be done on the topic of the role of women in leadership. In January 1985, the CFL made a note of reaction to a statement from Eastern Mennonite Seminary that affirmed women in ministry. As the discernment of this issue continued to emerge, congregational representatives urged CFL officers to keep the discussion open in conference. The role of CFL was beginning to be redefined as enablers rather than decision makers.

A “Dialogue Day” discussion brought representatives from around the conference to share around the question of “Women as Pastors.” Based on reports of that day, the CFL proposed “*Guidelines for District and Congregational Leaders in Processing Women for Assignment in Ministry.*” This document, approved in January 1986, offered a review of headship, gifting, and credentialing as critical components of discernment. A key sentence indicates the careful opening provided: “There may be occasions where the call of God as discerned by the local congregation would best be followed by making credentials available for women in ministry.” This is followed by a non-gender-specific review of procedures to be followed for all credentialing. The specific approving action reads, “That we agree to release the revised

statement, as a CFL guideline paper for the use of our districts.” “The action was passed with one dissenting vote.”

At the same time, preparation was being made for a study on “headship” that was presented at the 1986 summer assembly. This process was continued through a study committee, which developed a document called “*Headship and the Leadership Role of Women.*” The ad hoc committee’s final report to conference acknowledged that they had not come to agreement; therefore, the paper would have two approaches. They recommended that the document “be viewed as a tool for districts and congregations.” Each district was expected to use the guidelines to establish its final resolve on the question. In October 1986, the Council on Faith and Life took action to approve the recommendation of the personnel committee for the licensing of a woman as part of a pastoral team. In January 1988 there was a clarifying question raised in the CFL. “Do the Headship Study and our other guidelines indicate our openness to the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry? Answer: Yes. This stance needs to be communicated to our churches.”

The following observations are offered from the review of historical material.

1. The issue of women in pastoral leadership had its first consideration at the denominational level before Virginia conference worked at its own resolution.
2. Both the denomination and conference recognized that the issue of headship had a polarized perspective. Both headship and mutuality were respected without labeling each other. Bishops/overseers brought the issue to CFL for counsel and discernment. No attempt has been made to identify a third point of view.
3. In the study process, it was stated that the decision-making process was one of study and discernment to seek spiritual direction rather than a democratic process that would put men and women in competition.
4. In the final resolution there was no formal action by the delegate assembly that decided which belief was to be embraced. The role of the Council on Faith and Life was to establish guidelines recognizing mutuality in credentialing for ministry. Later CFL adopted the denominational polity statement on leadership.
5. In Virginia Conference the approval process for granting credentials by Faith and Life Commission recognized a variation of convictions in districts and congregations. Overseers have been allowed to abstain in voting and a uniform voice on the issue has not been required.

Membership and Military.

Mennonites have a long tradition of being a nonresistant peace church when faced with military service. Conscientious objection to participation in military service was the expectation for male members of Virginia Mennonite Conference during World War I, World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Vietnam War. Local conferences and the broader Mennonite Church worked diligently with government leaders to secure alternative forms of service such as Civil Public

Service, I-W, and VS Programs. Persons who participated in military service forfeited their membership in Mennonite congregations.

The most significant rethinking of membership and military service occurs in Virginia Mennonite Conference. In 1990, the Norfolk and Warwick District Councils began work on a document “Criteria for Membership in Tidewater Area Mennonite Churches.” (See Appendix II for outline of the study document.) The document provided a rationale for the necessity of reviewing peace theology and practice based upon the experience of engaging in ministry in a militarized environment. The study document provided a historic overview of Anabaptist and Early Church perspectives on military service. There was a review of biblical perspectives that spanned the Old Testament and New Testament. The Mennonite Confession of Faith (1963) was reviewed and cited as an important point of reference. The document provided a detailed explanation of the challenges currently being faced in the 16 congregations in the Tidewater area. The conclusion of the document includes a statement providing a framework for emerging understandings.

Norfolk and Warwick District Councils sought broader counsel in their work. They invited 23 persons in various leadership roles across the Mennonite Church to contribute additional counsel. Following some revisions and the District approval of a “working document,” their work was submitted to VMC Council on Faith and Life as the “Tidewater Document” for “their information and further counsel.” CFL brought the document to the delegate assembly in July 1991. The delegates raised affirmations and concerns.

FLC continued to work on this issue in a variety of ways. In 1993 the Faith and Life Commission (FLC – successor to Council on Faith and Life) arranged for a “Study Guide on Membership Eligibility for Military People” to be sent to congregations. The results of these studies were compiled by the FLC and consensus developed “that further discussion and discernment was essential.” After further delegate discussion and congregational responses, the FLC prepared a revision of the concluding paragraphs of the “Tidewater Document.”

The animation of the subsequent delegate discussion led to a call for a special delegate session to address this issue. In preparation for that session, the FLC noted the need to broaden the conversation beyond the Tidewater experiences. It moved to affirm Article 22 “Peace, Justice and Nonresistance” from the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) “as a normative statement of our peace theology and endorse the accompanying commentary.” It went on to outline a further process of discernment around the “appropriate pastoral care and nurture of military personnel who God is drawing toward membership in our congregations...”

An FLC document, “Church Membership and Military Personnel” was proposed with a pastoral letter attached suggesting that the FLC “take initiative with congregational leaders to evaluate growth of convictions on peace...and member’s progress toward separation from military service...and report back ...in the fall of 1998.” On January 20, 1996, the delegate body adopted

“Church Membership and Military Personnel in Congregations of the Virginia Mennonite Conference.” Following the 1998 review, it was reaffirmed in July 1999.

Perspectives from the broader church were received in two venues. In 1995, a consultation in the Tidewater area included representatives from Mennonite Central Committee, the Faith & Life Commission, and persons with military connections. In 1996, the General Boards of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church extended their November meeting to include a consultation on this topic.

The document includes a reaffirmation of the “historic and biblically based convictions on peace” and concludes, “that loyalty to the military oath is incompatible with loyalty to one’s covenant as a disciple of Jesus Christ.” The second paragraph notes the attitude toward difference on this matter. “We further recognize that the congregations of Virginia Mennonite Conference use a variety of ministry styles to lead new believers out of military service. While Virginia Mennonite Conference does not endorse the practice of some congregations in extending the covenant of membership to persons currently under the military oath, the Conference wishes to remain in full relationship with these congregations and to continue in mutually respectful dialogue.”

In 1999, there was a review of the direction that had been set by the 1996 documents. That progress report called for congregations to “become magnetic compassionate faith communities, ...” It called on pastors to “energetically and faithfully teach the Anabaptist/Mennonite understanding of the Biblical teaching on nonviolence, peace, and non-participation in the military...” It also asked that in 2001 the FLC again take the initiative “to review progress on implementation of our 1996 statement, evaluating discipling processes, growth in congregational convictions on peace, and members’ progress toward separation from military service.”

Observations:

1. The congregations of Norfolk and Warwick Districts raised this issue out of the context of their mission in their communities.
2. The request for counsel went to VMC and to the broader church since there was concern that this may point toward a “historic shift” in peace teaching.
3. The VMC discernment process, while guided by the FLC, included congregations, districts, and delegate assemblies.
4. The resulting statement reiterated affirmation for a historic stance, acknowledged differences in pastoral applications, called for commitment to full relationship in spite of this difference, and established regular review procedures.
5. The reporting that followed included stories of change in the lives of persons.
6. The interchange with MCC led to the development of an “Alternatives Committee” out of Warwick District to provide teaching and options for those tempted by vocations in the military.
7. The study document was only affirmed as a study document and not as a policy statement.

8. While VMC was working on the statement of Military and Membership, simultaneously VMC was working on a position statement “Our Commitment Against Violence” which dealt with domestic expression of violence.
9. The presence of intentional leadership was demonstrated in the clarity of documents, the attention to, and participation in group process, and the engagement of conversation with others on the issue with integrity.
10. There was no outside pressure to solve this opportunity immediately.
11. Opposition concerns voiced at the delegate session were tabled without a vote.

Removal of Broad Street.

Students at Eastern Mennonite College founded Broad Street Mennonite Church as a ministry to the black community of Harrisonburg in 1935. Since it’s founding, Broad Street has been a source of periodic tension for Virginia Mennonite Conference. One of the more difficult issues has been Broad Street’s theological commitment to the “priesthood of all believers” concept with the application being no designated lead pastor with ministerial credentials. At the end of the 1980’s and early 1990’s a group of members left the congregation and created Immanuel Mennonite Church. Additionally, Broad Street promoted a Christological view that contributed to a period of probation in the Harrisonburg District. This background sets the context for leaders of Virginia Conference to respond to the awareness of the Broad Street meetinghouse being used for a planned covenantal ceremony of same gender persons.

In January 2002, a pastor from another District reported to the conference minister the awareness that Broad Street was in the process of renting their facility for a same gender covenantal celebration. As the District overseer began inquiring about this event, other leaders in VMC registered concern. In February, Conference Council asked Harrisonburg District to process the situation with Broad Street and to follow the VMC by-laws. The overseer of Harrisonburg District engaged in conversation with the Harrisonburg District and Broad Street representatives. The District made two requests to Broad Street: a) not to rent their facility for this purpose; b) to state their position regarding MC USA guidelines on membership. Representatives from Broad Street gave witness to their intentions and concerns during a meeting with representatives from Harrisonburg District. The Harrisonburg District continued to express concern about Broad Street’s commitment to the same gender ceremony.

In May 2002, Conference Council met for the first time since joining MC USA. In this meeting, two congregations requested transfer out of Virginia Conference. Harrisonburg District and FLC both reported on their activities and concerns associated with Broad Street. Conference Council affirmed the work of Harrisonburg District. Districts representatives also registered deep concern about the activities at Broad Street.

Harrisonburg District provided Broad Street with the opportunity to remain in VMC as long as they comply with the teaching position of MC USA on matters of sexual practice. Broad Street indicated that compliance would mean a violation of their sense of call to inclusivity. Broad

Street's counter offer to suspend membership from VMC for six months was part of their proposal, which would include dialogue and discernment.

Learning of the outcome of the Harrisonburg District and Broad Street dialogue, FLC recommended to Conference Council the immediate suspension of Broad Street. Additionally, a recommendation was made to form a discernment group with a facilitator for further conversation. In July, the Conference Council suspended Broad Street and reported their action to the delegate body at Virginia Conference Assembly.

In October 2002, a discernment group was convened with a denominational minister functioning as the facilitator. The discernment group was comprised of 9 people: 3 Harrisonburg District representatives, 3 representative from Virginia Conference and 3 representatives from Broad Street. This group met once and decided no further meeting was necessary. Broad Street had indicated a desire to continue in an advocacy role of accepting practicing homosexuals into their congregation. The consensus of the group was that further dialogue would not be helpful nor change positions. Additionally, the group urged a conference wide process to review Virginia Mennonite Conference processes dealing with differences of theology and practice. In light of the commitment by Broad Street to their position, the delegate body voted to dismiss Broad Street from VMC at its February 2003 delegate session.

The practice of removing congregations from Virginia Conference as a means of discipline is a very new phenomenon. Historically, a bishop representing a district would discipline a minister for inappropriate behavior or for promoting a teaching that was inconsistent with the beliefs of the conference. Members of a congregation were disciplined for their failure to uphold the Rules and Disciplines of a Conference. In more recent times, great effort has been made to extend grace and forgiveness to persons who have failed to uphold the teaching position of the church through pastoral care and counseling. This approach was seen as more desirable than public announcements of discipline and other means of social ostracism. The practice of removing congregations from a conference has emerged as Mennonite Church USA has sought to deal with sexual ethics, specifically homosexual practice. Broad Street is the congregation that challenged Virginia Mennonite Conference's resolve to follow the membership guidelines of Mennonite Church USA.

Observations.

1. The process of leadership activity occurs over one year. Broad Street confirmed the same sex ceremony on February 27 2002, 4 months later Harrisonburg District recommends to FLC that Broad Street be removed, July 2002 Conference Council suspends Broad Street's membership and February 2003 delegates to Virginia Conference Assembly vote to remove Broad Street from membership.
2. The conference was in a state of anxiety regarding the joining of MC USA and the effect of a congregation testing the guidelines at this time heightened the tension.

3. Harrisonburg District felt pressure by outside pastors/districts leaders to “do something” before the whole conference “comes apart at the seams.” It seemed as if people outside the district drove the agenda.
4. Despite Broad Street’s and Harrisonburg District’s call for “dialogue,” the energy for such dialogue never really materialized.
5. The clergy who had the initial concern about Broad Street was not brought into a conversation with representatives of Broad Street. The offended party and the offender (Broad Street) have not met.
6. The lack of credentialed leadership at Broad Street made it difficult to know whom to deal with in terms of giving and receiving counsel. This variable contributed to the inability to work with mutual trust in and through the crisis.
7. The lay leaders of Broad Street began to demonstrate greater connection to VMC through the process.
8. This process of Broad Street’s removal from Virginia Conference led to a decision to review our growing understandings of faithfulness and diversity in VMC.

Analysis of Data.

Embracing faithfulness, discerning our differences

When we view our primary existence as members of the body of Christ seeking to inform the world of an opportunity to be part of God’s kingdom, social change will occur among us. It is because of our intersection with the world on Christ’s behalf that embracing faithfulness and discerning differences is a necessary role of the Church.

Embracing faithfulness is a commitment to be a follower of Christ that is discovering God’s movement through biblical study. The Bible informs our life, witness, and mission in the world. One of the holy tasks of the gathered community is the discernment of biblical truth applied to contemporary challenges that contribute to our being faithful to God. The Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective as well as other faith statements of the church represent the discernment of the body of Christ. These documents grow out of sincere biblical study by persons committed to serving God and the Church. The affirmation by the assembled body of Christ is confirmation that God has been at work in our midst. While the denomination guided the development of discernment for The Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective, regional conferences have also discerned God’s spirit for their specific needs in faith statements. The statements generated by the denomination or conferences are seen as confirmation of God’s continued movement in the body of Christ.

The review of information concerning the social changes about divorce and remarriage, women in pastoral leadership, and military and membership indicate that these issues included significant wrestling with long held biblical positions. The process of dialogue included acknowledgement of previously held beliefs of sin and faithfulness. New learning about biblical passages were presented. Theological commitments were reaffirmed in light of new biblical

interpretations that supported new avenues for faithful living. Another key element was open conversation by delegates that included responding to presentations by designated speakers. Virginia Mennonite Conference has consistently incorporated biblical and theological considerations as bases for changing long held beliefs. While there were significant disagreements, there was a sense of seeking to provide opportunity for concerns growing out of mission and ministry activity.

Discerning our differences recognizes that faith statements are not law but guiding principles for our life together. People and congregations are growing in awareness and commitment to faith statements. At times, people and congregations have felt uncomfortable with new language and concepts of faith statements and continue to use long-held language and concepts of previous faith statements. Recognizing the nature of the movement of God's spirit, persons engaged in mission and ministry uncover new ways of thinking and being that places them in the complexity of having moved beyond the faith statements of the body of Christ. The margin of difference by those not embracing new faith statements is similar to those that move beyond statements of faith. It is in recognizing these polarities in the body of Christ that give rise to the necessity of discerning our differences.

The primary virtue that is necessary in the age of diversity and the process of discernment is humility. In an age of individual preference and assertiveness, the ability to value another person's knowledge, experience and interpretation of events when it is different from our own will require vulnerability and trust. One of the ways humility is modeled is by the ability to give witness to what one believes to be true, supported with knowledge and personal experience without demanding allegiance to a singular point of view. Faithfulness is not only defined in matters of belief, but also in conduct when there is difference of opinion.

The meaning of membership

When individual interpretation of the Bible exists in a group, belief and practice will become more diverse. When congregations can interpret the Bible on given theological commitments, diversity will occur. Subsequently, membership in the group can be assessed on the bases of compatibility or compliance to the core convictions of the group.

Virginia Conference recognizes the importance of people having membership in the body of Christ, which occurs at baptism, confession of faith or letter of transfer. There is the commitment to the local assembly of believers being the primary entity, which holds membership. Each congregation is expected to provide instruction around the teaching positions of the congregation and to engage in discipline of those members that persist in ignoring the teaching position of the church.

In Virginia Conference, congregations have held different positions on divorce and remarriage, women in pastoral leadership, and church membership and military involvement. The diversity of contexts where congregations are located has necessitated this practice. At the same time,

members within a congregation have a wide range of belief and commitment. Congregations have approached variant beliefs among members in a variety of ways. In some congregations, leaders have discerned the degree which persons could hold variant positions of primary commitments. Leaders have presented the teaching position of the church, but have given permission for persons to hold individual interpretations of those commitments. In some settings, variance in belief and practice is met with accountability groups to bring greater clarity to commitments.

Virginia Conference could address congregations and their pastoral leaders being at variance with the Conference by developing a process whereby congregations and their leaders could request a variance on particular beliefs and practices. In this model, when a congregation can no longer support the church's position, the pastor would report to the overseer the specific area of concern and report their growing awareness. When a pastor desires a position that is at variance with the Conference, the pastor would place in writing to the overseer their unfolding awareness. The overseer would register the variant positions with the Faith and Life Commission.

The role of leadership

Leadership is a significant variable in each case study. The "membership and military" case study benefited immensely from the leadership of the Norfolk and Warwick District. The leaders associated with this social change provided a description of the reality of their ministries, provided information about their biblical and theological commitments, described their approach to pastoral relationships with persons engaged in military service, and invited feedback from a broad range of persons. In the Broad Street case study, Harrisonburg District, the overseer, FLC and Conference Council engaged in leadership in order to bring about a solution to the conflict. At the same time, the absence of a credentialed pastoral leader at Broad Street added to the complexity of the conflict for Conference leaders. In the case study on women in pastoral ministry, the primary leadership initiative comes from the denominational discernment and conference leaders seek to manage a constructive social change for their constituency.

The difficulty that is faced with church leadership is that numerous organizations may be involved and called upon to provide leadership. For example, in the Broad Street case study, Harrisonburg District, the overseer, FLC, Conference Council, other District leaders, and delegates to conference carry a leadership component. With multiple layer organization the clarity concerning responsibility, the authority to act, and the limits of leadership authority are key variables that emerge through these case analysis. The Broad Street case study demonstrates the activity of multiple leadership groups engaging in their sphere of responsibility and remaining connected to other leadership groups that also have authority to act on the matter.

The individual's gifts and skills in a leadership role is a variable in the exercise of leadership. In the membership and military case study, Gordon Zook, a seasoned administrator with the breadth of church wide leadership responsibilities, is a principal contributor to the work in creating a

document and guiding the process in Norfolk and Warwick Districts. A less experienced leader would not have achieved the same results.

Jim Shrag identified a key leadership task as “alignment” in the May-June 2003 “Equipping.” He wrote, “In an organization like a congregation, there are many voices calling for direction. Alignment is bringing all the interests together to forge a central focus, a direction. Alignment as a leadership task is necessary when focus is lost, when diversity exists within a group, and when goals need to be established. Alignment seeks to provide the answer to the question “which way are we headed?”

In most circumstances, the role of leadership is to assist a group of people in accomplishing their mission or to help them discover a way to solve a challenge that is being faced. In the last number of decades, congregational leadership has been associated with the development and facilitation of a process of decision-making versus authoritarian assertions by the key leader. The activities of leadership include gathering information, identifying persons to help solve the challenge at hand, to facilitate the group process, sharing information about the process with constituency and to ensure that persons participating in the discernment have a voice in the decision making process. This includes providing opportunity for the dissonant and minority voices to express their views and concerns.

Recognizing the power of fear and anxiety

Change creates anxiety and fear within individuals and groups. Let us recognize that in the last 5 years creating Mennonite Church USA by integrating the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church has produced anxiety and fear in our constituency. Simultaneously, in the Harrisonburg area, major agencies of the church were experiencing significant CEO leadership transitions: Mennonite Media Ministries (1998 CEO), Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community (1999 CEO), Eastern Mennonite Seminary (1999 academic dean) Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions (2002 president), Eastern Mennonite High School (2003 principal), and Eastern Mennonite University (2003 president). These leadership personnel changes contributed to uncertainty in “who is leading the church.” Fear and anxiety limit people from taking risks and seeking constructive change. People cling to the known rather than venture into the unknown.

When information went into the community that Broad Street was allowing a covenantal ceremony for a same gender couple anxiety raced through the community. The cohesiveness of Virginia Conference following the discernment concerning MC USA was strained. There was fear that more congregations would leave VMC. In the MC USA discussions, uneasy leaders who feared acceptance of homosexual practice in MC USA were given reassurances that the homosexual problem was resolved. Broad Street became the test case for VMC concerning their resolve to uphold the denominational position.

Even with an outside facilitator, Broad Street and Virginia Conference could not find common ground. There is some awareness that the anxiety about mediation and dialogue contributed to a very narrow scope for the facilitator to lead a discussion. Subsequently, the mandate may even have overlooked the importance of the facilitator gathering data from principal parties before the meeting. The intake of information from principal parties could have contributed to a broader conversation.

When a group of people within a congregation or conference is anxious, there is a tendency to revert to establishing order by the use of power and authority. The immediate use of power by an individual may be appropriate in times of crisis. In times of high anxiety there is also the tendency to engage in labeling, polarities develop and defensiveness begins to emerge. Solutions that emerge often are associated with severance of relationships as an immediate corrective. One of the constructive ways leaders can deal with the presence of fear and anxiety in a group is the development of a process of discernment that seeks to address the primary issues that are causing uncertainty.

Assumptions about diversity

“Diversity” defined by Webster means “the condition of being different.” Differences abound in our life. There are 46 Mennonite groups in North America. Each group defines itself in a unique way. Richard Foster introduced the awareness of six distinct streams of spirituality that inform our reflection about God. Persons seem to migrate to one predominate stream for knowing and experiencing God. Myers-Briggs indicates that there are 16 personality types. Historians recognize multiple streams of Anabaptism that have informed contemporary understanding of Mennonite belief and practice. Diversity exists in our life including personalities, spiritual nurture, faith heritage, and theological commitments. Others have often viewed Mennonites as people of similar values, convictions and patterns of behavior. In the last two decades, there is a growing awareness among Mennonites that there are divergent beliefs, practices and patterns of behavior. Virginia Conference constituency also recognizes the breadth of diverse faith expressions within our group.

In three case studies, we recognize that members of Virginia Conference are demonstrating different practice on those issues. Example, while VMC allows for women in pastoral leadership some congregations would not call a woman to the lead pastor role. The Tidewater congregations have discovered ways to integrate persons with military involvement while some congregations in the Harrisonburg area have difficulty incorporating a police officer among their members. Provision has been made by VMC to incorporate persons who are remarried following a failed marriage, but numerous persons who remarry feel limited acceptance from constituency of VMC.

It is equally true that persons in Virginia Conference congregations come from a variety of Mennonite and other religious traditions. Other polarities in our conference include educated/uneducated, poor/wealthy, female/male, conservative/liberal, and various ethnic traditions now

represented. In light of this diversity, conversations around faithfulness as a follower of Jesus in an Anabaptist Mennonite context are necessary.

Virginia Conference Mennonites adheres to the Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective (1995). This statement of biblical conviction expressed in contemporary language provides clarity of core convictions for Mennonites in North America. Our diversity asks of us to be in conversation with persons who are moving to embrace the particular way we hold our core commitments. In light of the diversity present in Virginia Conference, people will always be discerning their convictions in relationship to our core commitments. The primary challenge faced by Virginia Conference is the way in which leaders guide and instruct on matters of faith. When leaders are seen as guiding persons on a continuum of faithfulness encouraging persons to move towards the core values of the group, Conference leaders will seek to enable congregations to mentor and care for persons growing towards maturity. When diversity is not valued, beliefs and practices are monitored, observed for divergence and maintenance of boundaries is accomplished through careful discipline of erring members.

Discernment: who speaks for God?

As the Church engages in mission, new awareness concerning human behavior, core convictions, and societal need emerges within the body of Christ. The Church in each era of time is called upon to discern faithfulness to God in the midst of the contemporary challenges.

Virginia Conference recognizes the importance of the continued experience of God speaking to the body of Christ, the Church. God reveals truth to the body of Christ through our encounter with scripture. It is in our encounter with scripture that sets the stage for our interaction with other believers and the corporate body of Christ. When the body of Christ engages in discernment through prayer, study of scripture and conversation within the body of Christ, the outcome of the discernment is the will of God and is proclaimed as the leading of God's spirit.

In order to discern God's movement in the Conference, Conference leaders gather and share information, hear testimonies of God's activity in the world in relation to the subject at hand, and have designated a group of persons to provide documentation as to the leading of God.

The contemporary challenge that may need clarification is related to group discernment through consensus taking or voting taking. The primary means of clarification of God's will in a group has been to have a leadership entity generate a resolution and invite the assembled body to cast a vote. A desire for the pursuit of consensus building as a model for discernment remains a concern.

Appendix II

“Criteria for Membership in Tidewater Area Mennonite Churches”

Outline of study document

I. WHY THIS STUDY

Growing Churches in a Militarized Environment

Where to Draw What Lines

New Questions

II. DISCIPLING

The Mandate to Make Disciples

Discipling in the First Century

Military Participation as a Discipleship Issue Today

III. ANABAPTIST AND EARLY CHURCH PERSPECTIVE

Regulative Principles for Anabaptists

Early Church Practice

IV. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Peace as the Vision of the Old Testament

Peace in the Gospels

Peace in the Epistles

Peace and the Christian Life

Mennonite Confession of Faith

V. TIDEWATER EXPERIENCES

Current Church Participation by Active Military People

Members With Previous Military Involvement

What if Current Members Join the Military?

Recent Congregational Experiences

VI. EMERGING UNDERSTANDINGS

Reaffirmation and Confession

People on the Way

Implementation and Status

Recommendations to Conference Council

1. Develop a study guide as a supplement to the document “Embracing Faithfulness, Discerning Our Differences.” Congregations could use the study guide to review their own history on the three case studies presented in the document. The study guide could include suggested study material for biblical interpretation, congregational discernment, and congregational relationships to Virginia Conference and Mennonite Church USA.
2. Identify key issues that are at the forefront of constituency life and develop a discernment process that could become “a how to” in conference discernment. A number of issues that might be considered include: bioethics, human sexuality, healthcare, materialism, new pastor transitions, and overseer transition and education.
3. Virginia Conference Assembly continue the practice of delegate discernment on key issues of our life together. Affirmation was given for the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation about our life together at this past Conference Assembly. We recommend discernment be a key part of Assembly versus a continuation of the presentation of institutional reports without opportunity for engaging the material in meaningful ways.
4. Develop a leadership process whereby congregations and their leaders could request a variance on particular beliefs and practices. The leadership process may include the opportunity for a congregation or a credentialed leader to make a request for variant belief status. One of the important concerns was that the overseer and/or the Faith and Life Commission would be primary participants in discussions of variance.
5. Develop new forms of membership criteria for congregations in Virginia Conference that allow for the congregational distinctive. Associate membership or fraternal membership status may allow for the potential inclusion into Virginia Conference of the former Mt. Valley District and/or Cornerstone Fellowship congregations. Lancaster Conference has been granted permission by MC USA to offer congregations membership in Lancaster Conference without participation in the denomination. Similar opportunities for the former Mt Valley District and Cornerstone Fellowship may allow for renewed fellowship. Conference Council could explore these possibilities for our former constituency congregations as well.
6. Explore opportunities of healing and hope with Broadstreet Mennonite Church. While we recognize the authority for Virginia Conference to discipline congregations that have broken fellowship by their commitments, we also believe in the possibility of intentional relationships that can lead to restoration. We encourage the Conference Council to develop a mandate and identify persons to explore the possibility of reconciliation.
7. Review the process of congregational discipline by a conference. Our work did not specifically focus on church discipline. A study on this theme could be helpful for

establishing procedures for dealing with congregations that may be at variance with the teaching position of the church.

8. Invite the Faith and Life Commission to review the orientation, tasks and accountability of the Overseers with the intent that the role provide closer supervision for both credentialed and commissioned leaders.
9. Encouragement is given to Conference Council to develop a mediation process promptly when potential division exists within Virginia Conference. Polarization of issues can emerge quickly, destroy meaningful communication and inhibits learning and sustained relationships. Conference Council as the executive body of Virginia Conference can engage in preventative leadership by exercising this leadership function in a timely fashion.
10. Faith statements of Virginia Mennonite Conference need to remain consistent with the Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective. Whether those faith statements have been written in the past or will be written in the future, Conference Council is urged to review those statements for consistency of belief and practice.
11. Educate clergy and lay leadership on the polity statements of Virginia Conference. During the recent leadership challenge dealing with Broadstreet, pastors, overseers, districts and congregations at times appeared to act independently of the leadership processes of Virginia Conference. A review of roles and responsibilities of these leadership entities could assist in providing clarity in future conflictual circumstances.
12. Develop guidelines of accountability for credentialed and commissioned leaders of Virginia Conference. While many of us have argued for the necessity of credentialed leadership as a key variable in a healthy congregation, district, and conference leadership relationships, one former congregation had commissioned leadership. Develop accountability structures that may incorporate congregations that are moving through leadership transitions or have chosen not to have a credentialed pastor.