

Baptism and Membership: Why is it a Question?

Why might there be a need to consider exceptions to the classic—and still affirmed—Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding that to be baptized is also to become a member of a local congregation and the larger Mennonite denomination to which it belongs?

The Faith & Life Advisory Council (FLAC) offers examples, drawn from real life, that raise the possibility that occasionally there may be a need to allow for exceptions to the usual practice of connecting baptism and membership.

- Sometimes hesitance to be baptized involves new participants feeling unsure who Mennonites are and being comfortable at most with their local congregation. For example, as reported by one Franconia congregation, an ex-drug dealer says, "I accepted Jesus as my savior and want to turn my life around. I don't know a whole lot about Mennonites but I love this church." Another man who started to attend after family trauma reports, "I am scared about being a Mennonite. I committed myself long ago to Jesus but never followed through with baptism. I trust the people I have met but there are a lot of people I do not know yet. I had a negative church experience before. If they are all like the ones I know I am good with it, but it takes a lot of trust."
- A senior in high school expresses deep desire to be baptized as a symbol of her commitment to follow Jesus. She has clung to this desire despite memories of a negative church experience that led her family to disconnect from church during her teen years and left her with little opportunity to experience what it would be like to be a congregational member. In a few months she would leave for college and lack adequate time to build a membership relationship with a congregation. Listening to her soul, sharing faith stories, discipling, and prayer prepare her for baptism. A group of two friends and two other adults gather to support her and share their baptism stories. A baptism service is planned at her home with family and friends. This young woman is taking her commitment to follow Jesus seriously, while the support group is staying connected in hope that she will someday become involved in a faith community.
- Two sisters, in their mid- to late teens, ask to be baptized but not become members of the Mennonite Church USA or their local congregation. They want to follow Jesus and to express this publicly through the baptism they believe God is calling them to. But they are not convinced the teachings of the MC USA or their local congregation, particularly related to peace, are entirely right for them. The congregation's leaders process their request carefully, confer with other Franconia Conference pastors, and conclude they must honor the request rather than risk quenching the work of God. They disciple the teens in teachings of the Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective without expecting full assent, set up baptisms at a local creek, and proceed with the understanding that this is an exception to what will usually remain their linkage of baptism and membership.
- A young adult raised in another country by missionary parents sees the local setting as one too temporary to justify commitment to a particular congregation. He asks for and is supported in baptism into the Mennonite church at large. Years later, as his roots in a particular country and setting deepen, he commits to membership in a local congregation.
- Sometimes due to congregational decisions or teachings that seem hurtful to a person they know, a variety of Christians nurtured in Mennonite settings come to doubt the value of the "institutional church." Believing they will have more integrity if they do not signal their support for the institution through baptism, they elect not to be baptized even as they continue on spiritual journeys.

Pastoral Guidelines for Baptism and Church Membership

As a general policy, the Faith & Life Advisory Council (FLAC) of the Franconia Mennonite Conference supports the connection of baptism to membership in a local congregation. This is in keeping with our ecclesiology and *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. (Note article 11 with explicit commentary statements on page 48.) It is our belief that becoming a follower of Christ is equivalent to becoming part of the body of Christ, which includes joining a local community of believers. This commitment to the church visible distinguished our Anabaptist forbears from other 16th century reformers.

We hear today of various reasons why some persons express hesitancy about becoming church members upon baptism. These hesitations at times relate to reservations about specific teachings of the church, uncertainties created by popular images of Mennonites in our culture, a sense of being unprepared for the practical responsibilities that seem incumbent on church members, confusion about the relationship of baptism and the church, etc.

How shall pastors respond to those who wish to be baptized as followers of Jesus but are reluctant to be counted as members of the local congregations?

We see in the Scriptures examples where people apparently were baptized as believers without simultaneously joining a local church. These examples include the Ethiopian eunuch, the Philippian jailer and his family, and the thief on the cross who believed but was not baptized. We recognize the current need to grapple with certain confusion concerning church and denominationalism, especially membership in a church where a European culture and ethnicity continue to be so prominent. While we may wish we were more like the dynamic movement of the Spirit in the 1st or 16th centuries, our call is to address the challenges of being Mennonite Christians in the time we now live.

We do not support efforts to reduce Christian discipleship and baptism to a personal faith apart from a transformed life. Nor do we affirm two levels of membership — baptized members who are full participants, and those baptized but restricted in participation (like voting or holding office). We affirm that baptism marks a beginning of a journey (rather than a successful culmination of a membership class) and that there needs to be room for growth and maturation by those who are baptized. In preparing persons for baptism, more attention might well be given to learning to follow Jesus (practices of the faith) rather than simply seeking full doctrinal assent.

We suggest that pastors clarify the meaning of membership around the basic Anabaptist concept of “giving and receiving counsel” rather than around full doctrinal agreement or the individual’s capacity to sustain the structures and programs of a congregation. This would permit younger people and newer Christians to become participants in the body of Christ, offering their voices at whatever level they feel ready to participate. As spiritual maturity develops, the ability to give and receive counsel, along with the ability to support the church institutionally, will increase. It is natural that in their formative years, new Christians will receive counsel more than give counsel. As they grow they will begin to assume appropriate responsibilities and more readily offer counsel to the body. Healthy churches will offer good teaching, mentoring, and learning resources to assist people to be formed as mature disciples of Jesus. Churches will want to provide a basic curriculum for spiritual growth, including biblical content, instruction in prayer, discovering one’s gifts and

calling, along with the formational dynamics of life in the Christian community of believers. In this way the church signals that the Christian life is a lifelong journey toward forming a Christian mind and Christian practices.

While FLAC continues to support the policy of baptism leading to membership in the church, it recognizes that pastors may at times relate to individuals who sincerely desire baptism but for various reasons are hesitant to become members of the church. In these unusual circumstances we offer the following provisional guidelines:

1. As a first response, pastors should present a grace-filled biblical and practical rationale for connecting baptism and church membership.
2. For a person who genuinely desires to follow Christ and to be baptized, and expresses seemingly insurmountable hesitations about membership, it is important that a small group be designated to provide support, nurture and accountability for this person in and following his/her baptism.
3. In deciding to baptize without membership, pastors and elders would do well to reflect on questions such as:
 - a. Is there any expectation that in time this person will move toward and wish to become a member of this congregation or another?
 - b. Is it an option to wait for a period of time until the person has processed and moved beyond the current hesitations?
 - c. Can steps be taken to address the hesitations, or are the issues beyond the control of the person or the church (perhaps a parent or spouse resists one's membership)?
 - d. Does the person express openness and readiness to participate in the life of the community with accountability for his/her growth as a Christian? (Apart from membership, this sense of engagement with the people of God is considered essential to healthy discipleship.)
 - e. Is there a clear sense of discernment and agreement among congregational leaders about God's leading in making this decision, and has there been appropriate assessment of how the congregation will respond to any decision about this matter?
 - f. Has there been consultation with a conference minister and openness to broader conference/denominational counsel?
4. That on occasions when pastors choose to proceed with baptism without formal membership, they assume spiritual responsibility for relating to both the person baptized and to his/her small accountability group in an ongoing way, with a view toward inviting this person at some point into membership.
5. That congregational leaders provide clarity on such practical issues as the leadership roles or offices such persons might hold in the church.

These perspectives were tested and received broad support from congregational leaders, and are now offered for pastoral guidance to the leaders and congregations in the Franconia Mennonite Conference. This document will be reviewed periodically with regard to the actual practice in congregational life.

August 2005, Faith & Life Advisory Council: Charles Ness, chair; David Greiser, Michael King, Beth Styer; James M. Lapp, staff

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