

FRANCONIA CONGREGATIONS AND CHRIST'S GOSPEL OF PEACE

Discussion Document by Franconia Mennonite Conference Faith and Life Advisory Council
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HISTORY

As Mennonites in the twenty-first century, we build on the rich heritage of believers throughout the centuries who were committed to the way of peace. It is clear that Christians in the first several centuries did not participate in the military. Most Anabaptists during the Reformation period believed that followers of Christ should reject use of the sword to defend themselves or exact revenge on their enemies. That testimony continued when Mennonites came to America, and from the Revolutionary War to the present there has been a consistent witness of peace by segments of the church.

INTRODUCTION

As Anabaptists, our commitment to Christ's Gospel of Peace needs continual refining—not because Jesus' teachings change, but because settings change in which we live out the teachings. Violence on American soil has caused us to examine our peace commitment afresh. The U.S. has experienced a wave of patriotism (with Mennonites not immune), symbolized by the omnipresence of the flag, prodding us to re-examine our loyalties to Christ and country. Whenever the U.S. closes ranks against "unambiguously evil" foes, we are challenged to renew witness to the One who taught love for enemies.

Mennonite Church USA is committed to developing missional churches. Most Franconia Conference churches have been receiving new Christians or Christians from other faith traditions into membership for years. As we do, we experience mixed responses to the Gospel of Peace:

1. Sometimes persons with convictions for peace are drawn to our fellowships. They find a home in a church where personal faith in Christ is combined with commitment to Christ's nonviolent way.
2. In some cases, persons have been drawn to faith in Christ but find it hard to accept the way of peace in light of previous loyalty to country or personal response to violence.
3. At other times, persons drawn to Christ and the church find their occupations (military service, employment in a defense industry) at odds with the teaching of Jesus.
4. Some churches are actively discussing the appropriateness of church membership for persons who work in law enforcement.

How do we "do church" faithfully given our dual commitment to mission and full obedience to Jesus? This paper seeks to suggest some direction, not so much to resolve all such specifics but to lay out principles to be used in reaching decisions regarding them.

HIGHLIGHTING OUR SCRIPTURAL COMMITMENT TO PEACE

The Biblical teaching and Anabaptist-Mennonite commitment to peacemaking, provides opportunities to witness to all people and nations about God's saving love and encourages us to be ambassadors of reconciliation amid conflict. This way of peace is summarized in Articles 22 and 23 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

In a brief review of the Scriptures we see that Jesus taught that we are to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, and pray for those who oppose us. Peter wrote that Jesus left "an example that we should follow in his steps," and that, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he was threatened he did not threaten." Paul reminds us that vengeance belongs to God, and to do good to our enemies (Matt. 5:39, 43-45; Rom. 12:17-21; 1 Pet. 2:21-23).

The *Confession of Faith* underscores and elaborates on this teaching when it says that, "We believe that peace is the will of God," which includes the conviction that "As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service." It further states that as followers of Christ we are called to live out peace on a daily basis since, "The same Spirit that empowered Jesus also empowers us to love enemies, to forgive rather than to seek

revenge, to practice right relationships, to rely on the community of faith to settle disputes, and to resist evil without violence” (Matt. 5:39; I Cor. 6:1-16; Rom. 12:14-21).

We understand Article 22 to encourage us to teach each other (including our children) about conflict resolution and to work in study groups at ways to heighten peace in all areas of our lives and culture (including ways that reduce media, computer game and other forms of violence).

Article 23 clarifies the church’s relation to government and society. “As citizens of God’s kingdom,” the article emphasizes, “we recognize that the church knows no geographical boundaries and needs no violence for its protection.” Christians are to “respect those in authority and to pray for all people, including those in government,” but may participate in government and societal structures “only in ways that do not violate the love and holiness taught by Christ and that do not compromise our loyalty to Christ.” This principle can be a touchstone as we discern what occupations fit with loyalty to Christ.

Whenever our society’s organizations or levels of government call us in directions that risk disloyalty to Christ, we are instead to “witness to the nations by being that ‘city on a hill’ which demonstrates the way of Christ,” and the awe-inspiring understanding that “Christ, by his death and resurrection, has won victory over the powers, including all governments. Because we confess that Jesus Christ has been exalted as Lord of lords, we recognize no other’s claims as ultimate” (Col. 2:15).

APPLICATION OF THE PEACE POSITION IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Franconia Conference is fully committed to the scriptural teaching summarized in Articles 22 and 23, including the strongly worded portions noted above. Yet the question arises regarding the extent to which members in a Franconia Conference congregation may hold views different from core affirmations of Articles 22 and 23 and still be in good standing, if already members, or welcomed into membership if applicants for it. Without intending to cover every situation that may arise, Franconia Conference proposes these as guiding principles whenever tension arises between Articles 22 or 23 and views of individual members or applicants.

First, we see the following as the key question for any who may feel some tension with the biblical teaching of peace yet are not actively opposed to it: *Over time, do you see yourself as traveling closer to the biblical teachings summarized in Articles 22 and 23, farther away from them, or not changing your position?*

We believe the basic qualification for membership of persons who feel tension with Articles 22 and 23 is their ability to answer that they are traveling toward its teachings. There are persons who, because of background, life experience, or biblical interpretation may be unable to embrace the way of peace in full, but who can in good conscience confirm that they are seeking to allow God to continue to lead them in and not against this teaching.

Second, specific departures from the teachings of Articles 22 and 23 are then to be processed on a case by case basis within congregations by pastors and elders or other discernment groups used by that congregation. The understanding here is that a given departure may be permitted if a) a member or applicant and a congregation’s discernment group concur that the departure does not invalidate this person’s overall commitment to continue to travel on toward an ever fuller embrace of Articles 22 and 23; and b) all involved are prepared actively to acknowledge that the particular departure is permitted as an exception, not as a repudiation of them.

Third, we affirm that some Christians may with integrity hold aspects of God’s truth revealed to them that are at variance with Articles 22 and 23, and have insights from which we can learn, but we encourage them to seek a denominational home more fitting to their understanding of God’s ways and the teachings of Jesus and Scripture.

As congregations committed to being centers of mission, it is both an opportunity and a challenge to be faithful to the Scriptures which teach that to be at peace with God is to also live in peace with others.