

**Faith and Life Advisory Council (FLAC)**  
**“How to Approach Potentially Divisive Issues in the Church”**

Seminar held at Souderton Mennonite Church  
May 6, 2006; 8:00 – 10:30 a.m.

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**AGENDA**

**Focus of the meeting – Jim Lapp**  
(document follows)

**Overview of FMC approach to critical issues in past 50 years – Blaine Detwiler**

**Recent FMC approaches led by FLAC – Michael King**  
(document follows)

**What is the range of issues we now face? – Sharon Wyse Miller**  
(document follows)

**Key principles in working at critical issues – Beth Styer**  
(document follows)

**Plenary discussion on the approach being proposed – c/o David Greiser**

- What questions do you have for clarification?
- How comfortable is your congregation with the challenge of discernment on substantive issues of faith and practice?
- How prepared are we to live with more than one resolution to an issue?

**Conversation as congregational teams - Jim**

- What substantive issues has your congregation faced in recent years?
- How would you evaluate your handling of these issues? What did you learn?
- What does your congregation need to grow in its capacity for discernment on substantive issues of faith and practice?

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**Members of the Faith and Life Advisory Council:** Blaine Detwiler, David Greiser, Michael King, Sharon Wyse Miller, Beth Styer, Jim Lapp, Staff Leader

**Selected Resources:**

- Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*, 1995 (available on MC USA Web Site)
- Kropf, Marlene, *Discernment: Grounded in God, Four Biblical Foundations for Individual and Group Spiritual Discernment* (6 pages on MC USA Web Site, with a bibliography)
- Kropf, Marlene, *Discernment: A River Runs Through It, Flowing with the Current of the Spirit in Church Meetings* (6 pages on MC USA Web Site, with a bibliography)
- Glick, Sally Weaver, *In Tune With God: The Art of Congregational Discernment*, Faith and Life Resources, 2004, (210 pages with a leaders' guide and bibliography)

Note: A DVD of this meeting is available for loan from the Mennonite Conference Center's Resource Center.
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Presented by Jim Lapp

## Focus of the Meeting

- Church has always had divisive issues to deal with.  
(Note Acts 15, I Corinthians, Titus 2:10-16, etc.)
- Recently issues seem more “adaptive” and less linear in nature.  
“We are increasingly experiencing examples of change much too complex and unclear to be served well by the linear-problem solving model.” Gil Rendle
- Even good churches can quickly become polarized or stuck.  
“...Conflicts are more complex, ensnarled, and nasty in nature...Resolution is demanded within a quick time frame....The concern for success is reflective of ....the anxiety in the system.” Peter Steinke
- Missional church only heightens the range of challenges we face.
- Major shift occurring from conference to congregational discernment.
- Congregations and their leaders need to prepare for the hard work of discernment. What does discernment look like? When and how do we learn to do this important work? “Congregational discernment is a corporate spiritual discipline. It is a creative, informed, attentive, and interactive practice of the church, led by the Holy Spirit.” Sally Weaver Glick
- Resources of the Scriptures, our Anabaptist forbears, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, silence, etc., along with a broad range of skills and many writings are available to assist us as guided by the Holy Spirit.
- In place of “position statements” (as in former years), the Faith and Life Advisory Council is charged with offering perspectives and helpful approaches to themes and challenges that face the church.
- Questions:
  - How comfortable are congregations with the change in how issues are addressed in the FMC?
  - Are congregations and leaders prepared to accept the challenge of local discernment on important questions?
  - What training and resources are needed for this to be done well?

*“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:9-11 NRSV*

**Recent FMC approaches led by FLAC**  
**The Centered Group: Understanding the Current Franconia Discernment Style**  
Presented by Michael A. King

I. **Introduction:** Paul Hiebert and three models of viewing denominational, conference, or congregational boundaries: unbounded, bounded, centered

II. **The unbounded group:** little clarity or concern regarding who is in or out—or whether there is an in or out

This model might be imagined as dots of loosely clumped people. They may be together because —

- Some like each other;
- Some share similar interests;
- Some just happen to be there at the time.

III. **The bounded group:** based on clear rules, people can be defined as in or out. This model might be imagined as a clearly drawn circle with dots representing people being placed clearly inside or outside the circle. Person are in the circle if they agree to the rules that define who belongs in the circle. They are outside if they don't agree to the rules.

An example of a circle-defining rule: *Christians do not bear arms*. A circle defined by this rule will treat as—

- In the circle people who agree with and live out the rule that Christians do not bear arms;
- Outside the circle people who feel unable to support or live out the rule, including people who accept military or police service.

IV. **The centered group:** people are loosely in or out of the group based on whether they are primarily traveling toward or away from the core values affirmed by the group.

This model might be imagined as having a central circle labeled “Jesus and his teachings.” People are represented as dots traveling toward or away from that Jesus center. Here—

- People are not so much in or out as moving in or out of the group.
- People are moving into the group if they're traveling toward the center.
- People are moving out of the group if they're traveling away from the center.

The FLAC peace document provides an example of what the centered group idea can look like in practice.

The interesting thing here is that people may start out very close to the center and so for a time appear to be close to Jesus even while being aimed away from Jesus, meaning that over time they will end up far from Jesus. Or people may be far from the center yet be traveling toward it, meaning they are ultimately more committed to Jesus than those who are close to the center yet aiming away from it.

Presented by Sharon Wyse Miller

## **Faith and Life Issues That Challenge Us . .**

*FMC Breakfast Seminar on Divisive Issues, May 6, 2006*

1. **Can 'normal people' be Mennonite? (Are Mennos too good to be joined by 'normal people'?)**
2. **How and when do we call people to faith?**
3. **What does it *really* mean to be saved?**
4. **Does it matter more that my sins were paid for on the cross or that Christ rose victorious from the grave? (views on atonement)**
5. **How do we nurture people in the faith? (Do we?)**
6. **Should an Anabaptist Christian be involved in politics?**
7. **Can a police officer be a Mennonite?**
8. **How do we balance missional challenges with safety issues in our churches?**
9. **Can we both have evangelistic zeal and be intentional in peace and justice work?**
10. **Is it okay for Christians to be rich in a world of economic disparity?**
11. **What if we don't all agree that women be called as pastors?**
12. **Why don't we care more about immigration and deportation?**

**How will the church 'speak the truth in love' about sexuality?**

**Do we borrow too much from other traditions in our worship? Liturgy?  
The arts? Style? Music?**

**Do our young adults experience our congregations as safe places to ask faith questions?**

**What are our fears around leadership authority?**

17. **Other?**

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## Key Principles in Working with Critical Issues

**Relational Accountability**-Vital ongoing **relationships** are the key to accountability. Faith and Life issues facing congregations can be discerned only when **relationships** are built, nurtured and practiced. Discussion takes place in the spirit and practice of prayer.

Goal: Each person's viewpoint- including our own-offers potential **treasure** to any holders of alternative viewpoints open to enlarging their original understandings. Genuine conversation encourages the quest for the **treasure** in another and the faithful expression of our own viewpoint so that it too can become part of the **treasure** the other is seeking.

### Key principles:

1. **Engage** in meaningful open, honest conversation with others in the community for the purpose of discerning God's will and purpose. Be impeccable with your words.
2. **Respect** the other person as a beloved child of God, in whom God's spirit dwells. Make no assumptions, listen.
3. **Release** the other to God's care and providence. Don't take anything personally.
4. **Understand** that no one has a corner on God's revelation. Each of us brings a perspective from our personal history, priorities and our interpretation...

### Eight keys to "Unlocking Horns" - From adversary to ally.

1. **Intention:** Persons set their intentions at the beginning of the conversation. "I would like to get to a place of mutual understanding". "I would like to resolve this in a peaceful way."
2. **Presence:** Participants need to be completely present in the conversation . Thinking about your breathing is a key to staying connected, it brings you back to the present moment.
3. **Emotional clarity:** Take care of the emotions you are feeling, understand what is causing your discomfort.
4. **Understanding:** Rather than communicating your position, find out what the conflict is about from the other person's point of view. You honor the dignity of the other person. If you don't learn about the other person, you are only responding to his or her behavior, not what lies behind it.
5. **Personal Accountability**-What can really open up the conversation is when you are willing to express dismay that you are each in this position of conflict. "I am sorry if I have offended you in some way, can you help me understand how you heard this?" "I am sorry that this happened."
6. **Affirmative language**- tell someone what you are thinking or what you want with a clear statement.
7. **Win /win-** When it seems that all is lost, a moment comes when a creative possibility emerges. Going through the process allows God's divine truth to emerge. This means that everyone lives with greater understanding and greater respect for the other person- something shifts and each person feels a sense of new possibilities.
8. **Appreciation**- Appreciation is like the tipping point because without it , you still have self-interest. By expressing appreciation, something shifts. "I appreciate that you are willing to stay in the conversation." "I appreciate that you are willing to listen to me." We also want to be mindful, after going through this process, that we really take the time to acknowledge the discipline and commitment that is has taken and that we have done our best , even if our best is not perfect.

"How to Communicate Effectively When Your Buttons are Pushed."= Elisha Mason & Michal Golan