

Forming Relational Accountability in the Character and Culture of Mountain States Mennonite Conference

Over time, every organizational structure, by choice or default, develops patterns of behavior that evolve into a particular culture. This paper intends to set forth an operational philosophy for the proposed Mountain States Mennonite Conference and its constituent congregations that is intended to shape its character and ultimately its culture. Within a larger Christian context, we believe that a culture of relational accountability, reinforced by a supportive structure, will best serve the identity, character, and procedures of congregations in the Rocky Mountain region. Further, we believe that a new conference that exhibits a disciplined pattern of relationships will best honor and build upon an historic familial network that has characterized many of our past activities.

We want to first briefly illustrate the way in which identity is closely tied to authority and accountability. Secondly, we believe Jesus primarily called people to accountability based on the nature of his relationship with them. Third, we want to distinguish between relational authority that has integrity and authoritarianism that often results from the inappropriate use of power in relationships. Finally, we want to propose several ways in which relational accountability can have authoritative and identity-forming dimensions in the proposed Mountain States Mennonite Conference.

Authority, Accountability and Identity

In the context of our times, accountability has not been a popular topic. Accountability implies submission to some authority. Beside the secular trend away from accepting outside authority, we as Mennonites often associate accountability and authority with an historic heavy-handed system that dictates religious conduct based on positions decided by “someone else.”

Combined with distaste for older patterns of accountability, post-modernism encourages us to seek personal avenues of accountability that are closer, locally defined, and possibly less stringent. Freedom for individuals and groups to adhere to their preferred authority for accountability would not present much of a problem if it were not for another critical element: identity. Over time, identity is formed by that to which we give authority and to which we are willing to be accountable. These symbols of authority may be as diverse as personal definitions of success, ones own family, acceptance and love from a significant other, a behavioral creed or a religious dogma. Whether we have thought about it or not, most of us hold to some combination of authoritative beliefs or behaviors that shape our identity.

This becomes a critical issue for Christian groups where the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not optional. While we may manifest the centrality of Christ in different ways, functional congregations will seek a relatively coherent “picture” of Christ and the gospel message and grant to it a level of authority for their corporate life. If every individual in a congregation subscribes to a different authoritative image or interpretation of Christ for their individual identity, the congregation has a crisis of identity because there is no commonly agreed upon authority to which the community can appeal for resolution of differences or a clear guide for discernment. This situation could be applied to all other corporate bodies that are composed of separate, but inter-related parts: church conferences, denominations, and global communities.

Leaders who wish to call communities to accountability under a commonly interpreted authority will work primarily from some form of relational accountability, hierarchical or structural accountability, or a combination of both. As an example, Mennonite World Conference (MWC) has operated to this point primarily on a relational level stressing “koinonia.” for its member bodies. In its evolution as an identifiable Christian community, it is currently discerning whether there is enough ascription to a common set of Anabaptist values or beliefs among constituent members that they might move from simply an “association” or “affiliation” toward a “communion” of national

conferences. Such a movement seeks a deeper level of relationship and more particular identity. Leaders of MWC are trying to shape common identity by articulating and testing some basic common Anabaptist beliefs with books like C. Arnold Snyder's, From Anabaptist Seed.¹ In other words, at a basic level, is there enough commonly held authority to begin shaping a stronger common identity? At first glance, it may seem that the base for authoritative accountability is shifting from a relational one (koinonia) to a structural one (common set of beliefs). Instead, building upon a strong relational trust, there is an evolution that allows the global community of MWC to begin discerning and defining the shape of their common Anabaptist Christianity. Here, the goal of clarifying beliefs is neither to lord it over the heads of its adherents nor even to create a creedal structure for present or potential members. Emerging statements of belief serve as a basis for mutual discernment that will enrich the members of MWC as each brings their different perspectives to the table.

The relationship between accountability, authority, and identity deserves much more discussion in its own right. It is introduced here to lay a background for talking about what type of accountability, authority, and identity we might pursue in Mountain States Mennonite Conference.

Christ-Like Authority and Accountability

By Jesus' own words, his identity (and consequently, his authority) grew out of his relationship with God. His call to wholeness, healing, repentance, redemption and ministry were based on his relationship with God and he expected that those who received his message of wholeness would themselves develop a relationship with God. In other words, Jesus did not extend wholeness, and invite response, based on his positional power as a rabbi, nor on his earthly wisdom, nor on some sense of self-gained righteousness. Jesus extended wholeness as a vehicle of God's desire for healing, wholeness and relationship.

⁹ *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.* ¹⁰ *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love....* ¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command you.* ¹⁵ *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*² (John 15:9-10; 14-15, NRSV)

Further, Jesus warned against jockeying for position that would grant particular authority based solely on one's status or position relative to Jesus. In Matthew 20:20-28³, Jesus rebukes attempts to gain favor and authority by proximity, but rather, re-defines greatness in terms of relational position as "servant" and "slave." Some disciples had thought that being located "close to the top" would give them special privilege and power, but Jesus indicated that identifying with his personal role and calling would give them what they were asking for.

When discussing Jesus' use of his authority, the passage that often emerges is Jesus' cleansing of the temple area with force. Yet, even Jesus indignation toward the injustice that is being perpetrated

¹ Snyder, C. Arnold, From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity, Pandora Press, 1999

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 15:9-10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ (Matt. 20:20-28, NRSV) ²⁰ *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him.* ²¹ *And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."* ²² *But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able."* ²³ *He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."* ²⁴ *When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers.* ²⁵ *But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.* ²⁶ *It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,* ²⁷ *and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave;* ²⁸ *just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."*

by the people stems from his perspective as a servant of God and a redeemer for all the people. Jesus' authoritative action derived from an intimate relationship with God that gave him "God's-eyes" to clearly see injustice; even when perpetrated in the name of God.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus' identity unfolded as his authority continually flowed out of his accountable relationship with God. Through prayer and reaffirmation of his mission, Jesus stayed in connection with God's call on his life.

¹⁹ *Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. (John 5:19, NRSV)*⁴

And again...

³⁰ *"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. (John 5:30, NRSV)*⁵

The danger often associated with hierarchical authority is "authoritarianism." We have suggested here that Jesus was ministering – not primarily from position – but from relationship. Conversely, the danger often associated with relational accountability is that it lacks sufficient authority. By living out of a strong, centered relationship with God, Jesus was still able to avoid the opposing pitfalls of being authoritarian on one hand and "wimpy" on the other.

Relational Authority versus Authoritarianism

We believe that just as Jesus was able to live out of an accountable relationship with God and still avoid authoritarianism, we also can create a pattern (and ultimately a culture) of relationships that bind us to accountable prayer, community discernment, and decision-making without "lording it over" one another. As a result, we hope to form an identity that speaks and acts authoritatively as we gain the wisdom and guidance as a body to do so.

An important tenet of non-authoritarian relational accountability is respect for the other. This respect does not necessarily indicate agreement. We can disagree with another person or group without denigrating their ability to enter into conversation and make judgments. Often times, justification for violence relies on de-humanizing or minimizing our adversaries to something less than my position. In this way a person or group can justify using manipulation, positional power, or whatever means is at their disposal to exclude the adversary from "the table." Jesus' approach to dealing with enemies was to draw them **into** a relationship through agape love rather than drive them out of relationship. This behavior was based on God's approach to humanity as a whole:

¹⁸ *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*⁶ (II Corinthians 5:18, 19)

As a result, we are called to extend the same behavior toward others that God has extended to us.

Another way in which we can extend respect, and thus live in relationship with Christian groups or congregations with whom we don't agree, is to release them to the providence of God. Just as the individual Christian stands before God in judgment for their own faith and life practice, so congregations must also be accountable before God. All too often, questions of conference membership have turned into ultimate questions of salvation based on correct theology. In our disagreements, the goal is often to convert the other to our perspective. By clearly stating our perspectives and opinions, and trusting the Holy Spirit to work through our openness to speak clearly and listen carefully, we allow God to invite conversion. In this way, we are free to express ourselves, and to learn from the other because we know that ultimately we are not responsible to "fix" or

⁴*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.* 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid

“save” congregations with whom we disagree. What we are responsible to do is remain in covenanted conversation and prayer with one another.

What we want our congregations to ask is not primarily, “Do we agree completely?” or “Who’s right and who’s wrong?” but rather, “Can we work together even if we don’t agree?” and “What can we learn from each other if we stay in conversation?”

Are there points at which a congregation may move beyond the bounds of accepted life and faith practice as established within a particular conference? Yes, exclusion of congregations is certainly a possibility, but the manner in which a conference would deal with such an eventuality is through the process of the gathered community. Further, the exclusion of a congregation would be based predominantly on their failure to maintain relational accountability.

This is why Paul and Barnabas, along with the Judaizers, were asked to take their case to the Jerusalem council or assembly (Acts 15). In the context of relational accountability the questionable teaching of some in the church is to be judged⁷ by a larger body of the church.⁸ However, making a judgment about a congregation’s acceptability within the parameters of a certain conference’s normative culture is different than making a judgment about their eternal life.

Finally, we may avoid authoritarianism by believing that all of us have a part of the revelation of God to the Christian community. We all possess something of value. As Mary Benet McKinney says:

...the Spirit, in order to share with us the very wisdom of God, promises to each of us a piece of the wisdom. Repeat: a piece! ... The bottom line of the philosophy of shared wisdom is a deep and operational faith that the Spirit lives in the group through its membership and speaks through the lived experience of each one. To the degree that the group has both the faith and the skill to surface all the pieces of wisdom that result from this presence of the Spirit, to that degree will the group be able to come up with a decision that reflects the wisdom of the Spirit, the will of God for this group at this time. (p. 13)⁹

Simply put, a single congregation needs the discernment of others - spoken in a context of the Christian community - in order to live a faithful life. One congregation or individual’s assessment that another congregation or individual has some sin in their life does not **automatically** disqualify them from participating in discernment of faith and life issues.

Relational Accountability Reflected in the Proposed Mountain States Mennonite Conference

In Mountain States Mennonite Conference we will work at relational authority and accountability in a number of ways. First, we will seek to create a regular forum for discussion and discernment called “Faith and Life Forums.” These forums will build on our current familial character by providing a structured, facilitated environment for “worshipful work.”¹⁰ Participation in this highly relational venue will be required as one aspect of membership in MSMC.¹¹ The fundamental belief behind this level of mandate for congregations to come together in regular discernment is that through a worshipful disciplined relationship we will come to a better

⁷ At the root of the Greek word for “discernment” (krino) is the concept of “judging” or “sundering.” However this is different than an attitude and acts of judgmentalism.

⁸ Our proposed by-laws currently make provision for ¾ of our voting delegates to change the status of a member congregation.

⁹ McKinney, Mary Benet, O.S.B., *Sharing Wisdom*, Tabor Publishing, 1987

¹⁰ This model is taken in part from the effective work of the Constituency Leaders Council in Mennonite Church USA, but one could also look back as far as the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) for an effective example of a Christian forum processing difficult faith and life issues.

¹¹ A current proposal in the by-laws of MSMC would reduce the status of congregations from full covenanted members (voting) to associate member status if churches are not represented at two consecutive annual Faith and Life Forums or two consecutive annual Delegate Sessions.

understanding and practice of God's will for our corporate and individual lives. We further believe that understandings and commitments arrived at through a process of airing and exercising our different strengths and perspectives will engender a greater spirituality for mission locally and globally.

The Constituency Leaders Council of Mennonite Church USA has exhibited an ability to air significant differences while maintaining an atmosphere of worship and respect. We believe that one key to this ethos is that the CLC is not charged with making binding decisions. They may recommend, give counsel, and test various issues and ideas, but the freedom from needing to make decisions is also a freedom from the fear authoritarianism. Participants know that they can enter into honest counsel without being bound by the content of the discussion. We would argue that such a freedom actually contributes to the authority of the CLC and ultimately encourages an accountability that participating conferences are willing to give to this entity. Consequently, those bodies charged with decision-making in the denomination – the national assembly of delegates and Executive Board to name a couple – may take the counsel of the CLC with greater trust because they know it was discerned in an environment relatively free from the need to arrive at a particular decision. In our conception of a Faith and Life Forum for MSMC, we believe that we can replicate the role of the CLC at a conference level.

A second area of conference life in which we want to heighten relationships is in the area of generating and supporting mission. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, we want to encourage and facilitate those missions and ministries for which congregations and individuals have a genuine passion. While still providing basic structural support through some staff time, we want to take ministry out of committee and put it in the hands of those who have a passion for it. The simple equation is this: no passion for ministry = no ministry, passion for ministry = ministry happens. To be sure, committees, teams, or interest groups may be formed to facilitate the work of these contextual ministries, but the participants in those groups will also be the people for whom that particular ministry is a passion. In this way, authority for mission is closely connected to the responsibility for mission.

Conference committees will be organized around the foundational work with which the conference has been charged. A leadership team will focus the tasks associated with representing member churches and providing overall leadership to the conference. Since our conference of congregations has assets and manages money on behalf of member churches, a stewardship committee is also needed. Finally, since the denomination has mandated that conferences screen, credential, and support pastoral leaders, a committee will be formed to handle the various aspects of this task. These few foundational ministries will be maintained by the conference.

In sum, we want ministry to grow out of particular contexts and be addressed by people with a passion to do so. Since we have not yet found other organizations with a similar approach, we will need to learn how to sufficiently support and encourage contextual ministries as we go along.

A third relationship that we will nurture is our conversation with our historic faith. Along with scripture, documents like our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective are significant dialogue partners as we discern our faith and life together. Initially, this may not seem relational as much as hierarchical or dogmatic. Yet, we all choose how we use various writings and the Confession of Faith is no exception. If we want to use it as a dogmatic tool that legalistically defines proper expressions of our faith, it will not only be a misuse of the intent of the document, it will summarily be rejected by many of our participating congregations because it will not adequately express their present belief systems.¹² However, if the Confession of Faith is used as an expression

¹² The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 1995 itself indicates the historic role or confessions of faith in a Mennonite/Anabaptist tradition. It states in the introduction, "How do Mennonite confessions of faith serve the church? First, they provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible. Second, confessions of faith provide guidance for belief and practice. In this

of our collective historic and present day wisdom and is a respected partner in the discussion and discernment of faith and life issues, it will become a valuable objective “participant” as we relate to one another in an Anabaptist context.

Fourth, we would point to the relational act of prayer. Jesus was sustained in his ministry through his prayer life before the Father. We want to incorporate intentional prayer into our conference life. Organized prayer would be conducted coterminous with all of our major conference meetings.¹³ Staff time might be given to the organization of an active prayer network. Volunteers could be sought who have a commitment to regular prayer. Prayerful presence before God is an act of seeking God’s leadership in our discernment, but it is also an act of placing ourselves into a proper relationship with the One who is the giver of life.

Finally, MSMC would be staffed by persons who understand and exercise a relational style of leadership. Historically, visionary leaders who maintained a strong connection to persons in the Rocky Mountain region have engendered significant ministries. In future staffing, we desire to maintain this strong heritage of non-authoritarian relational leadership in Mountain States Mennonite Conference.

Conclusion

We understand that significant differences of opinion about various issues exist in the churches that would come together to form the Mountain States Mennonite Conference. As we become a new conference, we could seek to shape our many identities by asking a small group of people to prescriptively and absolutely outline the definitive tenants of our religious beliefs and operational behaviors. Congregations could then choose to comply or just walk away from the pre-defined tenants. We think this approach is not functional for a conference of churches who have much in common but differ on some significant issues.

On the other hand, we could structure ourselves as a simple federation or fraternal network with no common commitments to work and live together. By this arrangement, accountability would be determined strictly on a local basis by each congregation to determine, and ultimately congregational identities could be formed in very disparate directions. We believe such an arrangement would ultimately rob, not only us, but the Kingdom of God of the capacity for significant ministry that God has placed within our churches when we are accountable to one another. .

Therefore, we choose neither of the preceding approaches as we explore a new conference. God has already placed various portions of wisdom and insight into the lives of the churches who are coming together to form this conference. The challenge will be to see if we – together – can discover the wisdom that God has placed in our midst and the future that God is dreaming for us. To foster Christian maturity, we know that a disciplined approach to corporate spirituality – both at the congregational and conference level – are as essential as spiritual disciplines in the lives of individual Christians. Only by being accountable to the authority of God’s will revealed through our corporate gatherings will we be able to form and express an impassioned Anabaptist Christian identity.

connection, a written statement should support but not replace the lived witness of faith. Third, confessions build a foundation for unity within and among churches. Fourth, confessions offer an outline for instructing new church members and for sharing information with inquirers. Fifth, confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times. And sixth, confessions help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians and people of other faiths.” (p.8)

¹³ The by-laws propose that a delegate session or faith and life forum would not be official unless a “prayer vigil” of some type was organized to undergird the work of that particular gathering.