

Summary Statement of Relational Accountability in the Mountain States Mennonite Conference

Over time, every organizational structure, by choice or default, develops patterns of behavior that evolve into a particular culture. We believe that a culture of relational accountability, reinforced by a supportive structure, will best serve the identity, character, procedures and history of congregations in the Rocky Mountain region. We desire to create a conference in which we are not only accountable to each other, but also to God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As individuals, we form our identity based on what we give authority to in our lives. Over time, we remain accountable to certain attitudes, values, persons, and groups. It's the same for groups. Groups of people, like congregations and conferences, develop allegiances to which we give authority and which shape us over time. Therefore, we should pay attention close attention to which authorities we hold ourselves accountable. In Mountain States Mennonite Conference, we believe the example of Jesus invites us to an accountability that grows out of vital relationships.

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. 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.

But relationships can become dangerous when there is a power imbalance and they become too authoritarian. One important tenet of non-authoritarian relational accountability is respect for the other. This respect does not necessarily indicate agreement. We can disagree with one another without denigrating the others ability to enter into conversation and make judgments just because they disagree.

Another way in which we can avoid authoritarian attitudes when we don't agree, is to release the other 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. 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 relational accountability, we are responsible to remain in covenanted conversation and prayer with one another.

There may be points at which a congregation may move beyond the bounds of accepted life and faith practice as established within a particular conference. In our opinion, the rationale for separation should be based primarily on the failure to maintain relational accountability and should be decided by a majority of the body.

Finally, we may avoid authoritarianism by believing that all of us have a part of the revelation of God to the Christian community.¹ 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.

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

¹ McKinney, Mary Benet, O.S.B., Sharing Wisdom, Tabor Publishing, 1987

character by providing a structured, facilitated environment for “worshipful work.”² Participation in this highly relational venue will be required as one aspect of membership in MSMC.³

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. In this way, authority for mission is closely connected to the responsibility for mission. In sum, we want ministry to grow out of particular contexts and be addressed by people with a passion to do so.

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 will be significant dialogue partners as we discern our faith and life together.

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.⁴ 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. 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. On the other hand, we could structure ourselves as a simple federation or fraternal network with no common commitments to work and live together.

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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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 under-gird the work of that particular gathering.