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A Genealogy of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*

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Abstract: This essay offers a genealogy, in the Foucauldian sense, of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Thus, it provides an account of the origins of the document and its uses over time with attention given to the politics of both. The essay argues that the *Confession* was critical for the merger of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church especially as it took on the function of the "teaching position" of the church. By way of a case study, the essay explores recent uses to which the *Confession* has been put. The essay concludes by discussing an inherent tension in Anabaptist confessions between the desire to fix a set of common beliefs and convictions, on the one hand, and the necessity for a discursive shift both in meaning and use amid a changing context, on the other.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2005 *The Mennonite* published an editorial by Everett Thomas that quickly became a point of some controversy in the church. In that editorial, Thomas argued that the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (along with *A Mennonite Polity for Leadership* and the membership guidelines) played a crucial role in actions taken to revoke the pastoral credentials of Weldon Nisly because he performed a same-sex wedding; to remove the Hyattsville congregation from membership in Allegheny Mennonite Conference because the church accepted as members individuals who were in same-sex committed relationships; and to deny rental privileges at Camp Friedenswald to the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Interests, which had plans to host a Queer Camp there.^[1] Thomas's argument in the editorial was that the church should be grateful that the *Confession of Faith* (1995), together with these other documents, had made it possible for the new denomination to take such decisive disciplinary action without, as he put it, "roiling the church."^[2] We are better off as a church, Thomas argued, because these documents have given us "the necessary framework of accountability and discipline."^[3] With respect to the *Confession of Faith* in particular, Thomas argued that as a document adopted almost unanimously by the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church, "Our *Confession of Faith* . . . is now the bedrock upon which our discernment begins."^[4] Thomas concluded the editorial this way: "While some leaders and congregations continue to disagree with our confessional statements . . . it is helpful to have the rules in place. They are necessary in our tradition, which has believed for nearly 500 years that the church is the discernment community-with ultimate authority to determine what is right and wrong."^[5]

Twenty years earlier, the confession of faith study committee submitted a report of its work to the general boards of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. This committee, which included representatives from both denominations, had been formed in order to figure out whether a new confession was needed. In its report, the committee recommended that a new confession be written for the purposes of "building church unity and Christian faithfulness."^[6] However, having identified those two ambitious

goals for the new confession, the study committee then quickly added the following: "The committee members expressed some caution about expecting too much from a new confession. Partly because Mennonites *ought not use confessions as tools of creedal governance . . .* a new confession will not solve all 'problems' or guarantee unity or faithfulness."^[7]

In the course of the two decades that passed between the study committee's recommendation to write a new confession and Thomas's editorial, a disjuncture has emerged in our understanding of the function of the *Confession of Faith* (1995). Among those who recommended a new confession (some of whom then went on to write it), the *Confession* was not to be used to govern the church, including presumably decisions about whom to exclude or include. Among those who celebrate its recent uses, such a function appears to be the sign of a healthy church.

This paper offers a genealogy (in the Foucaudian sense of a history of discourse that is attentive to politics) of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* based on archival materials, articles in the *Gospel Herald* and *The Mennonite*, and personal communication with former and current church leaders. The genealogy highlights the functions for which the *Confession of Faith* was written and for which it has served since its adoption by the church, particularly in regard to the political significance of those functions over time. Although largely descriptive, the genealogy also offers the opportunity to explore some of the causes and significance of current controversies within the church surrounding the *Confession of Faith*.

ORIGINS

Already in 1982 the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy of the Mennonite Church was beginning to ask whether the 1963 confession was in need of revision.^[8] By spring 1984 the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church were assembling a joint committee to explore formally the possibility of writing a new confession. In December 1984 the study committee recommended that a new confession be written and by the spring of 1985 the two churches had already begun forming the committee that would write the new confession. Although only about two decades had passed between the adoption of the 1963 confession and the start of work on what would become the 1995 confession, much had transpired in the life of the church such that there was a strong feeling, though not a consensus, that a new confession was needed.

One primary catalyst for a new confession was the rapid pace of social change within and outside the General Conference and (Old) Mennonite Church congregations during the latter part of the twentieth century. As many G.C. and M.C. Mennonites became acculturated to the practices and ideologies of U.S. and/or Canadian culture, the question of identity within the church became paramount. Amidst rapid change a new confession was seen as an opportunity to bring the confession up to date with the culture. Thus, members from around the church argued for a new confession that would use inclusive language, eliminate the doctrine of male headship and the prayer veiling, and say something about homosexuality and lifestyle issues.^[9] A new confession might clarify Mennonite identity for internal purposes as well as for purposes of mission, especially through theological distinctives.^[10] As the Confession of Faith Study Committee put it, "the place of the Christian in the world [needed to be clarified] in relation to various ideologies. The cultural assimilation of Mennonites constrains us to

rethink this area."^[11] Indeed, as James Lapp (who was moderator of Mennonite Church from 1985 to 1987) has rightly pointed out, this question of identity amidst acculturation inspired not just a new confession of faith but also a coordinated identity project: "This acculturation led to four major identity tasks in this area: a new confession of faith (1995), a new statement of vision (1995, Vision: Healing and Hope), a new leadership polity (1996) and a new hymnal (1993). These were commensurate projects and all culminated between 1993 and 1996."^[12]

Another primary catalyst for a new confession (which was also related to the question of identity), involved the divisions that had emerged within both the General Conference and the Mennonite Church over theology, biblical interpretation and cultural practice (especially the peace witness). Controversy throughout the Mennonite Church reached a fever pitch shortly after the publication of George R. Brunk II's pamphlet provocatively titled "A Crisis Among Mennonites: In Education, In Publication," in which he assailed the Mennonite seminaries, certain Mennonite academics and various church publishing efforts for propagating what in his view were narrow-minded liberal views that were compromising Mennonite Christian commitment.^[13] Similarly, controversies over the peace witness, civil disobedience and homosexuality were troubling the General Conference Mennonite Church. In response, the general boards of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church sponsored conferences to address the divisions.^[14] In the Mennonite Church these conferences were known as "Conversations on Faith"; in the General Conference church they were known as "Dialogues on Faith." The stated purpose for both sets of conferences was to pursue unity through discussions.^[15] Importantly, then, these divisions, which were similar in character and which inspired a desire for unity, ran not between but through both churches.

Like the "Conversations on Faith" and the "Dialogues on Faith," a new confession of faith appeared to be a way to resolve these divisions. The Confession of Faith Study Committee put it this way: "As an expression of unity a new confession could provide a point of reference in addressing and dialoguing with challenges raised by particular persons or groups within the General Conference and Mennonite Church conferences."^[16] In recognition of the context of controversy out of which the new confession would be written, the Confession of Faith Study Committee strongly recommended that the confession be written in the context of ongoing dialogue throughout the church. In their report to the general boards, committee members wrote:

we agreed that an extended process, broader consultation, and addressing major issues with care and in mutual accountability would be as important as simply drafting a confessional statement. We would therefore see the process leading to a new confession as a major effort which could appropriately take several years, at least four and perhaps as many as six or eight. Such a process could also help a new confession gain acceptance and use, since it could hardly be imposed as the one acceptable confession.^[17]

And so it was. From the time the twelve-member joint Confession of Faith Committee officially began its work in early 1987 until it completed its work in 1995, the committee received and responded to hundreds of letters from individuals, committees and conferences in both churches who offered advice about the confession generally and critiques of drafts of articles.^[18] The committee presented drafts of articles to the general assemblies of both denominations for debate and approval.^[19] It responded to articles and letters published in church periodicals concerning its work.^[20] It endeavored to meet face-to-face with every conference and district in both denominations to hear their responses. With a completed draft

of the confession, the committee asked every congregation in both churches to respond in detail to each article by way of discussions in Sunday school classes or other similar settings. All of these responses were read and organized by Steve Nolt, who was then an eager and willing graduate student, and as is obvious from his many markings on Nolt's report, Marlin Miller studied the work with care.^[21] All of this is to say that the new confession of faith was written amidst extensive conversation, ongoing debate, critical exchange and responsive revision not only within the joint committee, which met often during those ten years, but also across the church among the many members who were interested to participate.

A look at the origins of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* indicates at least four functions that the *Confession* served even before it was officially adopted by the two denominations. First, it provided an ongoing opportunity for more or less focused conversation about Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, practice and identity. In this way the *Confession* afforded the church a productive way to continue the conversations that had been encouraged in the Dialogues on Faith and the Conversations on Faith. Both of those sets of conversations had been seen as helpful to the church but over time participation in them declined.^[22] As the work of shaping a confession of faith was put before the church again and again in a wide variety of contexts, those conversations were re-animated and discussion of significant divisions in the church continued. Second, given the conversational manner in which it was engaged by the church, the *Confession* enabled the church to talk itself into conviction about a set of beliefs and practice. Again, amidst divisive differences and through the process of writing, presentation, response, revision and discussion, the church (understood collectively as the committee and everyone who ever responded to its work) talked its way into being convicted of this document as its common confession. Thus, no one was surprised at Wichita '95 when both denominations voted nearly unanimously to adopt this confession. Third, by providing this discursive opportunity for the church to become convicted of its common confession, the *Confession* enabled a discourse of identity and unity in a church rife with divisions. Importantly, then, when we look at its origins we see that the possibility of a discourse of identity and unity was not simply the effect of a written confession. It was not the case that, having been presented with a confession that accurately reflected the convictions of the church, the church became identified with and unified by that document. Rather, it was in talking for ten years about the articles of the confession that the church came to a discourse of relative identity and unity. Thus, the *Confession* served as the discursive condition of possibility for a provisional identity and unity among the two denominations. Finally, fourth, the *Confession* enabled the church to espouse new truth. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* speaks a truth quite unlike the truth of the 1963 Mennonite Church confession or of the General Conference Mennonite tradition of confessional autonomy. Through this rich process of conversation among believers who gathered sometimes in Sunday school classes and other times in the pages of the *Gospel Herald* or *The Mennonite*, the new confession enabled the church to be the church discerning new truth.

USES

In the introduction to the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, the writers identify six functions of Mennonite confessions.^[23] They include "guidelines for interpretation of Scripture," "guidance for belief and practice," "foundation for unity within and among churches," "outline for instructing new church members and for sharing information with inquirers," "an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times" and "help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians

and people of other faiths."^[24] In the course of my communication with church leaders, I have found that the *Confession* is used mostly for catechetical purposes and to instruct new members coming from outside the tradition in Anabaptist-Mennonite faith. Also, pastors from around the church have used it as inspiration for sermon series on the *Confession*. Some conferences require that congregations seeking membership in the conference express a commitment to the *Confession*. Finally, all pastoral candidates in Mennonite Church USA are obliged to respond to the *Confession* as they complete the ministerial leadership information form.

Recognizing these uses, however, I also heard a recurring theme among church leaders that they do not understand the *Confession* to be a text that is often used. Whereas people are certainly aware of the *Confession*, it does not seem to be a text that they pull off the shelf for regular consultation as they go about their daily business for the church or as they engage in Bible study and daily devotions. I found this understanding confirmed when I led the Constituency Leaders Council (conference, constituency group and denominational staff leaders who meet twice annually for the purposes of getting to know one another and advising the denomination's executive board) in a study of what the *Confession* has to say about ecclesiology and the manner in which we ought to do the work of the church. Even among these leaders in the church, I heard exclamations of surprised appreciation for the *Confession*. In an open-mic session, for instance, one conference leader confessed that probably few in his conference had read the *Confession* recently and, further, said that he thought the conference should perhaps encourage them to do so. If the reports of church leaders are accurate, then it is probably unlikely that the *Confession* is often used according to the whole variety of purposes for which it was written. In what follows, then, I will focus on three visible uses of the *Confession* since its adoption and, thereby, highlight some of its prominent functions.

INTEGRATION

Just two months prior to the first meeting of the Confession of Faith Committee, the MC/GC Task Force on Cooperation held its first meeting to explore "the various ways that the two churches [were] already cooperating" as well as to discuss "hindrances to cooperation."^[25] Thus, the processes of integrating the two denominations and writing the new confession coincided with one another for about a decade. But, of course, they were not simply parallel processes. Although not reducible to integration, the project of writing the new confession was clearly connected to it. Even amid recognition of significant differences in cultural milieu, polity and practice between the two denominations, there was clearly a sense at the time among members of the Confession of Faith Study Committee and others that the two denominations could find theological common ground especially by way of a new confession.^[26] Indeed, as Vern Preheim (then the general secretary of the General Conference Mennonite Church) put it recently, "A key motive for me and for the General Conference General Board, in asking to join with Mennonite Church in writing a new confession was to lay a foundation for the integration of the two groups. Had we not been successful in agreeing on a Confession of Faith I believe integration would not have happened."^[27]

As the process of integration progressed toward an official merger of the two denominations, the question of boundaries, especially as they might be drawn with respect to the question of homosexuality and church membership, became critical. Importantly, from the perspective of a genealogy of the *Confession*, the document most responsible for at least provisionally resolving that division and, thus, enabling integration to go forward, were the

membership guidelines, which featured the new confession as the teaching position of the church. Of course, the new confession did not speak to homosexuality directly, despite many calls for it to do so. However, it did say that marriage is to be reserved for a man and a woman and, thus, implied that same sex-unions could not be sanctioned by the church. Identified in the membership guidelines as the teaching position of the church and, in particular, in specific connection with the issue of homosexuality, the *Confession* functioned as a primary discursive guarantee or limit against what many viewed as the very real threat of apostasy.^[28] Not only as a unifying statement of theology but also as a working statement of the teaching position of the church, then, the new confession was, as Vern Preheim stated, crucial for the success of integration.

As the "transformation" process continued and conferences that had opted for provisional rather than full membership status in the new denomination at the time of merger deliberated about whether to become full members, the *Confession* played a crucial role in their decision-making process. According to Keith Weaver, moderator of Lancaster Mennonite Conference (the single largest conference by number of member congregations in MC USA), the *Confession* together with the membership guidelines gave conference members confidence that the convictions of the church as stated in the *Confession* would remain stable over time.^[29] Likewise, Darrell Baer, conference minister for Franklin Mennonite Conference, said that the *Confession* was at the center of his conference's ability to give assent to joining the new denomination.^[30] Of course, the *Confession* also had the opposite effect-not only of bringing Mennonites together, but also of separating them. The Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites developed its own confession and the Conservative Conference, which had been moving toward greater unity with the Mennonite Church in the 1980s, decided to stay with the 1963 confession. In this way the *Confession* also served as an occasion for more formalized divisions among Mennonites.

EVALUATION

In anticipation of the merger between the two denominations at Nashville in 2001, the Transformation Team set in motion processes that would create a unified Mennonite Church USA. In the course of that work, bylaws were written, agencies were merged, new structures were created. Written into the plan of transformation was a provision for a review of what that process had produced seven years later. At the Constituency Leaders Council meeting in the fall of 2005 that review began in an informal way. On its own initiative the council began to evaluate the transformation, especially at the level of conferences. Having sensed that the process of transformation had not adequately addressed the role of conferences, the council created a task force and gave it the following charge: "to clarify the role of conferences, executive leadership, and its agencies."^[31]

At the spring 2006 meeting of the Constituency Leaders Council, which was devoted to preliminary work for the task force, council members were asked to comment on *Confession* articles considered especially relevant for the task force. Specifically, they were asked to consider articles 9 ("The Church of Jesus Christ"), 10 ("The Church in Mission") and 16 ("Church Order and Unity"). The members were asked to identify the Anabaptist convictions they saw in these articles as well as to say whether they affirmed those convictions as suitable for framing the work of the task force. The council answered with a resounding yes.

In the context of this effort within the Constituency Leaders Council, the *Confession* served to make the church's Anabaptist convictions available for consideration. Taken as the

document that most clearly offers such description, the council turned here to check its own commitment to those convictions. However, in addition to serving that descriptive function, with the council's resounding affirmative response to those convictions as stated and explained in the *Confession*, the *Confession* also has come to serve as a prescriptive document. That is, with the Constituency Leaders Council's response the task force was obliged to conduct its work, write its anticipated proposal for clarification of roles and evaluate that proposal against the Anabaptist convictions articulated in the *Confession*.

EXCLUSION

According to his official complaint to Allegheny Mennonite Conference, Jeff Jones, the pastor of Cornerstone Fellowship of Mill Run, a member church of the conference, observed that:

Hyattsville Mennonite Church (HMC) was represented [at the July 2003 AMC delegate assembly] by a delegate who, in a previous Delegate [sic] session (March 2001), identified himself as a homosexual in a committed relationship and as a member of HMC. He attended the summer session with his partner, participated with Hyattsville in leading worship at Conference, and has continued to represent Hyattsville as a delegate at subsequent Conference sessions. [\[32\]](#)

The complaint states further that Hyattsville had a longstanding practice of accepting "active homosexual persons as congregational members" and that because the conference had not responded adequately to this practice, three congregations had already left the conference and more were "consider[ing] similar action." [\[33\]](#) Finally, Jones requested in the complaint that "HMC reaffirm, before the Conference delegates, their acceptance of the standards of Christian Marriage as stated in the *Confession of Faith*" and that "HMC repent of its past practices and remove from membership any active practicing homosexuals" or that "they voluntarily remove themselves from membership in the Allegheny Mennonite Conference." [\[34\]](#)

In the months that followed, Jeff Jones, the Hyattsville congregational leaders and conference leaders met several times. They failed to reach a resolution to Jones's complaint. In a July 2004 meeting that included "witnesses" that Jeff Jones (in consultation with the conference minister, Kurt Horst) invited, the witnesses concluded "that the practice of the Hyattsville congregation in the matters of sexuality are inconsistent with the Mennonite Church USA position." [\[35\]](#) With that conclusion the conference's Faith, Life and Procedures commission met and then wrote a letter to Hyattsville. In that letter they said that the issue was "accepting people who are in committed gay and lesbian relationships (non-celibate) into membership" [\[36\]](#) and asked Hyattsville to answer the following question: "Does HMC think they are inconsistent with the Mennonite Church USA position in matters of sexuality?" [\[37\]](#)

On February 1, 2005, the Hyattsville church responded to the question posed by the Faith, Life and Procedures commission by "defending the position which our congregation has chosen with regard to welcoming gay and lesbian Christians into our fellowship." [\[38\]](#) In their response they, like Jeff Jones, referred specifically to the *Confession of Faith* (along with the membership guidelines and the Saskatoon statement). Unlike Jones, however, they argued that they were "consistent with nearly everything stated in the four documents." [\[39\]](#) They

identified only one possible inconsistency and that was "that HMC cannot as a congregation fully affirm the statement made in slightly different ways in each document" concerning whether homosexual sexual activity is sin.^[40] They developed this argument in the following manner:

As a congregation, we have not developed a consensus around agreement or disagreement with this teaching position, nor have we felt the need to do so. We do, however, have full agreement that we will welcome gay and lesbian Christians in committed relationships into membership and covenant with each of them, as with all members, to share a "life of discipleship and mutual care." To reiterate, we do not believe this to be inconsistent with the MC USA's membership policy.^[41]

In addition to arguing that their membership practices were consistent with the *Confession of Faith* and other Mennonite Church USA documents, the Hyattsville church identified what they understood to be another key issue-namely, how the *Confession* is to function in situations like these. They wrote:

We would . . . be remiss if . . . we did not address the nature of these documents, as there has been much discussion at HMC about their intent. Are they to be seen as descriptive of the understanding of a majority of Mennonites, or to serve as prescriptive decree from the institutional church? If the latter, it may be important for MC USA to indicate clearly which other positions of the church are also prescriptive and must be enforced by all congregations on all members for the congregations to remain in conference.^[42]

Putting the point even more strongly in a document that accompanied their letter of defense, they wrote:

It is our belief that the Body of Christ is seldom in greater danger than when it spends its energies patrolling the boundaries through the use of confessions, creeds, and "teaching positions." Although the language of the Nicene Creed was (and is) "Christ is Lord," the strategies and tactics of its enactment were precisely the strategies and tactics of the empires and structures of domination which we believe our Lord taught so strongly against.^[43]

At the March 5, 2005, meeting Alleghany Mennonite Conference delegates considered the following question: "Is Hyattsville Mennonite Church's policy of accepting into membership gay and lesbian Christians who are in committed relationships inconsistent with Mennonite Church USA's 'Membership Guidelines'?" As the delegates considered that question, they heard presentations on both sides of the question, including one by Jeff Jones and another by Joe Roos, pastor of Hyattsville Mennonite. Both presentations featured the *Confession of Faith*, albeit in different ways.

Jeff Jones's basic argument was that membership practices imply teaching positions. Further, that the membership practices of Hyattsville imply a teaching position that is inconsistent with the teaching position of Mennonite Church USA as stated in the *Confession of Faith* and other documents. Therefore, he concluded, the delegates should answer affirmatively the question put before them as to whether Hyattsville's stance was inconsistent with that taken by the broader church. In addition to framing that basic argument, Jones clarified the stakes in the application of teaching positions in the church. He said:

What we are not talking about is sexual orientation or a ministry to homosexuals. We are

talking about affirming sin as a lifestyle; affirming and rewarding the practice of sin, saying that a sin openly expressed in a committed relationship is OK and, rewarding that sin with membership, leadership in worship, and delegate status. Now, Hyattsville is asking us to sin by affirming their sin! Clearly, this is of the flesh and not of the Spirit. . . . It is a slap in the face of Biblical marriage. It is the defacto blessing of an unholy union by their congregation and their pastors.^[44]

For Jones, finding an inconsistency between the teaching position of the denomination and the teaching position of a congregation on an issue as important as homosexuality was a matter of sin for the whole conference. That is, if the conference did not resolve that inconsistency, he argued, the conference would be engaging in collective sin.

In his speech before the conference delegates in that March 2005 meeting, Joe Roos made the following case. First, he argued that the membership policy of Hyattsville was consistent with articles 9 and 11 of the *Confession of Faith*-that "the church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God" and that "Christian baptism is for those who confess their sins, repent, accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of his body, both giving and receiving care and counsel in the church."^[45] Second, recognizing differences of opinion on the question of homosexuality and membership in his own congregation and throughout the church, Roos argued that Hyattsville "must follow what we believe to be the Spirit's guidance for us-that sisters and brothers in same-gender, committed relationships belong, upon their confession of faith, in the church just as much as any of the rest of us."^[46] Further, he claimed that this practice is consistent with article 9 of the *Confession of Faith*, which states that "through the work of the Holy Spirit, divisions between nations, races, classes and genders are being healed as persons from every human grouping are reconciled and united in the church" and, further, (quoting again from article 9) that "the church welcomes all people who join themselves to Christ to become part of the family of God."^[47] Third, he argued that the membership guidelines do not explicitly bar people in committed, same-sex relationships from membership in Mennonite Church USA congregations. Fourth, he argued that since the membership guidelines do say that it is up to congregations "in consultation with their area conferences and in consideration of expectations for membership in Mennonite Church USA," and since Hyattsville "has consistently kept its overseer and conference minister aware of our process and practice along the way," that Hyattsville was consistent with the guidelines.^[48] Finally, after pointing to the words of several prominent Mennonites who have argued that the church ought not exclude homosexuals in committed same-sex relationships, Roos concluded by arguing that diversity and dialogue among persons who hold opinions with integrity strengthen rather than weaken the church.

Clearly for Roos, as for Jones, the *Confession of Faith* serves an important function in discerning proper practice among Mennonite churches. Both refer to the *Confession* as an authoritative statement of the teaching position of the church. However, whereas Jones asked the delegates to understand divergence from the teaching position (as stated in large part within the *Confession*) as sin, Roos wanted the delegates to understand diversity of opinion and practice concerning homosexuality as not necessarily divergence from the teaching position. Grounded in a more congregationally based ecclesiology, Roos asked that delegates see the membership practices at Hyattsville not as an expression of sinful teaching but, instead, as a matter of Christian integrity in the context of a diverse community.

At the end of that March 5, 2005, meeting Alleghany Mennonite Conference delegates answered yes to the question that was posed to them; by a vote of 112 to 38, they found that Hyattsville's membership practices were inconsistent with the membership guidelines. Six months later, after additional meetings of key participants, conference delegates met again, this time to decide what action to take to address that inconsistency. At that November 2005 meeting, delegates voted to make Hyattsville a "non-voting participant of AMC," which meant, among other things, that Hyattsville members could not be given assignments in Mennonite Church USA.

As even this brief review of the process concerning Hyattsville indicates, the issues were complex and intense. I want to highlight two issues that underscore how the *Confession of Faith* functioned in this process. The first issue centers on whether the *Confession* is a descriptive or prescriptive document. The second concerns the *Confession* as an authoritative statement of the teaching position of the church.

Clearly some participants understood the *Confession* to be a descriptive document-that is, as a statement that describes the theological and practical convictions of the church.^[49] Clearly others understood the *Confession* to be a prescriptive document-as one that governs or ought to govern the practices of conferences and congregations. According to Enos Tice, chair of Alleghany Mennonite Conference's Faith, Life and Procedures commission, the *Confession of Faith* "was viewed as 'the teaching position' of MC USA. However, while the majority of delegates viewed this as also being prescriptive (at least as relates to same sex relationships), some simply saw it as being descriptive of the majority of MC USA members and felt each congregation has the right to discern whether or not they agree to follow its teaching."^[50] Through the course of the process with Hyattsville, Kurt Horst, Allegheny Mennonite Conference minister, sought to resolve the tension between descriptive and prescriptive functions of the *Confession of Faith*. In an interview, he noted: "My standard response was: 'The confession of faith is a descriptive document. It is prescriptive only in the statements and to the degree that the delegates decide it should be.'"^[51] According to this understanding, the *Confession* is descriptive unless conference delegates take an action to determine that all or part of it is prescriptive. According to Joe Roos:

In our case, that meant that the majority of AMC delegates discerned that homosexuality, even among those in long-term committed same-gender relationships, is sin and, again, in their interpretation the Guidelines disallow such a person to be a member of a congregation. . . . Of course, another conference could view this issue as not prescriptive but descriptive.^[52]

Although the Alleghany Mennonite Conference's resolution to the descriptive/prescriptive tension was ultimately decisive in the Hyattsville situation, it nevertheless raises several important questions. First, is this a proper interpretation of the function of the *Confession of Faith*-that is, that all or any part of it may be made to function prescriptively by vote of some body of delegates? Second, what does it mean for Mennonite Church USA that one conference finds all or part of the *Confession* prescriptive while others do not? And third, on what grounds does, say, a conference decide that all or parts of the *Confession* are prescriptive? Are there certain appropriate grounds for making that determination? Can a conference be held accountable for the grounds used? Or is a majority vote sufficient? If a majority vote is the only condition required, then the question of the extent to which the use of the confession has become political must be asked. As James Lapp, a former moderator and general secretary of the Mennonite Church, put it recently:

In the MC there was the impulse to be more prescriptive and in the GCMC more descriptive. We vacillate on which it is—even today. Whenever we need ecclesiological leverage we make it prescriptive, but normally it is descriptive. Also, mostly it is used descriptively except when we want to evaluate another leader or congregation or institution [then] we tend to resort to the prescriptive perspective.^[53]

Throughout this discussion of the Hyattsville situation, reference has repeatedly been made to the *Confession of Faith* as the "teaching position" of Mennonite Church USA. Also throughout this discussion, we have seen that other documents are understood in the same way—especially the Purdue and Saskatoon statements on human sexuality. And there are still others. One of the presentations given at the Alleghany Mennonite Conference session in which delegates decided that Hyattsville's membership practices were inconsistent with the membership guidelines identified other key statements such as John E. Toews's commentary on the book of Romans as well as the writings of other Mennonite theologians, church leaders and conferences. Finding authority in other sources besides the denominational confession is by no means a new practice among Mennonites. In the General Conference, for instance, it was not uncommon for congregations to write their own confessions.^[54]

Having multiple confessions in use within a Mennonite denomination is not new either. Indeed, to some extent it is encouraged by Mennonite confessions themselves. The 1963 Mennonite Confession of Faith, for instance, states the following in its foreword:

But in recent years there has been some conviction that it is imperative to draw up a new confession of faith, not to repudiate any earlier confession, but to restate the doctrinal position of the church in terms relevant to today's issues, and especially to incorporate the insights of the various doctrinal pronouncements of Mennonite General Conference.^[55]

Likewise the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* recognizes other Mennonite confessions such as the *Schleitheim Brotherly Union* when it says that "The Mennonite Church still recognizes these articles [Schleitheim]. In time, this group accepted additional confessions: the *Dordrecht Confession* (Holland, 1632), the *Christian Fundamentals* (1921), and the *Mennonite Confession of Faith* (1963)."^[56] The logic that appears to allow new confessions to emerge without undercutting prior confessions is one of structural integrity and temporal application. According to this logic, all of the confessions remain true over time in their fundamental propositions; however, they differ and, indeed, need to be updated in order to make those fundamental propositions speak to changing context.^[57]

Although this logic seems reasonable enough, the practice of acknowledging multiple documents as the teaching position and recognizing older confessions amid more recent ones has led to some interesting practices. For instance, it appears that some congregations have along the way chosen to stick with the 1963 confession rather than adopt the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Not incidentally, some of those congregations have since left their area conferences and Mennonite Church USA.^[58] In other instances, pastors have chosen to retain portions of the 1963 confession (especially the articles on the prayer veiling and male headship) while otherwise depending on the 1995 version.^[59] That such practice would emerge—recognizing older confessions as newer ones are being written—was anticipated by Wayne North, executive secretary of the Mennonite Church at the time the 1995 confession was being written. In a letter to Bill Wiebe, a member of the board of Mennonite Brethren churches, North wrote:

The committee that first considered the issue [of writing a new confession] recommended that the goal be a new confession of faith. Their counsel was that confessions are not revised. Each stands on its own. If it is inadequate a new one is written. This allows those who feel an older confession more adequately reflects their faith to retain it without feeling it has been compromised.^[60]

A review of this genealogy of functions of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* yields the following. Prior even to its having been written, the *Confession* served as an occasion for sustained and widespread discussion of the theology and practice of the General Conference and the Mennonite Church. By way of that discussion, the churches talked themselves into a provisional resolution to the theological and praxical divisions that were troubling them. Thus, the *Confession* assisted in the construction of an emerging identity for a new, integrated church. In addition, it served as a set of boundaries for some who wanted a guarantee against liberal drift. As a sign of that unity and identity, the *Confession* functioned as a crucial condition of possibility for integration. Since integration the *Confession* has generally served the functions expected of Mennonite confessions: as catechetical document, as guide for certain kinds of decision-making, or as sermon inspiration. As we have seen in our consideration of two recent uses, the *Confession* has served as "the teaching position" of the church in both descriptive and prescriptive modes. In the case of its use in the Constituency Leadership Council, the *Confession* was used as a description of the theology and practice of Mennonite Church USA and served as a guide and criteria for evaluating the work of council's task force. In the case of its use within Allegheny Mennonite Conference as it considered the membership practices of Hyattsville Mennonite Church, the *Confession* was initially used by the individual who submitted the initial complaint as a standard against which to evaluate Hyattsville's membership and other practices concerning gays and lesbians in committed same-sex relationships. Further, it was on the basis of an evaluation of those practices against the *Confession* and other documents that a request was made that Hyattsville publicly recant these practices or leave the conference. As the process developed in the conference, a distinction was made between the intended function and available uses of the *Confession*. Recognizing that the *Confession* was intended as a descriptive document, the conference reasoned that it could be put to prescriptive uses by a majority vote of the delegates. Amidst these uses of the *Confession*, this genealogy finds the following: that even as the *Confession* is often identified as the teaching position of the church, other documents are identified in that way as well and that some congregations rely solely on earlier confessions and others use both the 1963 and the 1995 statements. This latter practice should not surprise us since the confessions themselves allow for such use and since such use was anticipated even by those who set out to write the new confession.

AUTHORITY AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FIXING CONFESSION

In the course of this genealogy, I have suggested that while the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* is all about unity-indeed, that has been perhaps its most important function from the perspective of the short history of this new denomination-it in no way reflects either a deep or surface unity. It does not reflect the core beliefs that the General Conference and the (Old) Mennonite Church shared as the *Confession* was being written in the late 80s and early 90s. Neither does it reflect a near consensus of the preexisting convictions among the Mennonites of those denominations in 1995. Instead, what this genealogy shows is that the *Confession*, as a document that was crafted amid extensive

conversation, debate and revision, contributed much to the construction of a unity that was then made visible in, for instance, the overwhelming affirmation of the new confession in 1995 and in the process of integration that ensued. Further, this genealogy suggests that the *Confession* functioned as a discourse constitutive of unity because it was taken to be an authoritative text that fixed Anabaptist-Mennonite convictions in time, as a privileged text and as a purposefully limited text. By way of these fixings the *Confession* signified an authoritative text capable of carrying its portion of the freight of unity. However, as a text in time, among other texts, and amid emerging purposes, it has also been a text that has not been able altogether to sustain those fixings. Thus, it is also a troubled text. And, perhaps, rightly so.

TIME

At the very beginnings of conversation about the possibility of writing a new confession in 1982, the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy of the Mennonite Church said emphatically that "Another statement should be timeless!"^[61] Perhaps not surprisingly, as the church was beginning to consider the possibility of setting forth a new statement of its convictions, it felt most acutely the significance of the possibility of disrupting the authority of the prior statement, which, importantly, was just a little more than two decades old. Replacing a prior confession with a new confession raises the question of the staying power and, thus, the authority of such texts. If in the course of a short twenty-one years, a confession can seem to become inadequate, then to what extent is any confession authoritative? Put another way, if confessions are so timebound that they can become inadequate in such a short period of time, how are we to trust them to speak authoritatively in the future? And for how long—perhaps even fewer than twenty years? In response to these understandable anxieties, the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy demanded that the new confession be timeless. This one, they required, must exceed the limits of time and, thereby, be truly authoritative.

Of course, as crucial as timelessness is for the authority of a confession, it is also impossible. On the one hand, the church has seemed to appreciate this fact. Whenever it has set about the task of writing a new confession, it has felt obliged to admit that the former one is inadequate because context has changed. However, the church has not always recognized the significance of the change. As we saw in the genealogy of the current confession, the church's tendency has been to think of the effect that time has as only superficial—that is, relevant only to the application of otherwise timeless principles. That may be so in certain instances but seems like a poor characterization with respect to the move from the 1963 confession to the 1995 statement, which entailed the declaration and justification of male headship, in the case of the former, and of "mutual relationship" in the latter.^[62] The structural relationship between men and women in the church and in the family seems hardly reducible to a mere question of application. Moreover, what principle is it that is being applied in such diametrically opposed ways in the two cases? Thus, although the characterization of the differences that obtain between one and then another confession theoretically solve the need to sustain the idea of timelessness, in practical fact it does not. The church's convictions, even its most basic ones, have been subject to change over time. The church has not had identical convictions over the course of its history as a church. And, thus, confessions are not mere reiterations of one another.

TEXT

Another way in which the *Confession* garners authority, which again is its condition of

possibility for enabling a discourse of unity, is by having been positioned by the action of the delegates of the G.C. and M.C. churches as the teaching position of the church. Having been granted the status of the privileged text by nearly unanimous vote of the two denominations, the *Confession* became the statement of the church's convictions. This was crucial for constructing unity among the two denominations in preparation for merger and for sustaining unity within the new denomination, because it gave the church the experience of having one voice, one word, one authority to which it may turn as questions and issues inevitably arise. If the *Confession* were merely one text among others, unity would be compromised since multiple texts are unlikely (at best) to speak in one voice. If they do speak in one voice, then they are arguably all the same text. To the extent that they differ and, thus, matter, they represent divergent voices to a greater or lesser degree.

As we have seen by way of the genealogy, however, even among Mennonite confessions there seem to be multiple privileged texts. And this is not by accident. The church is obliged to deal not just with various kinds of texts that people say are authoritative but, in fact, with multiple confessions. This is so because of the logic described above whereby the church can say that confessions are timeless. The church can say that confessions are timeless to the extent that it says that every past confession remains true at least in its principles. If the church did not make this claim, then it would have to admit not only that some prior confession was in error in some fundamental way but also, by implication, that a new confession might likewise be flawed. So, rather than admit the possibility of such error, confessions "recognize" the ongoing authority of prior confessions. In this way, of course, they justify the use of multiple confessions which, as we have seen, has been a practice even in Mennonite Church USA.

The problem is, of course, that confessions are not identical. As mentioned above, there is a fundamental difference between a theological and biblical commitment to male headship versus gender equality. Not surprisingly, when churches or individuals have reverted to the 1963 confession, they have tended to do so on the issue of male headship. This is a problem for confessions and for the unity of the church not only in terms of practical application such as whether a congregation or conference will ordain women, but also in terms of the overall authority of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and, thereby, its ongoing ability to serve as a discourse that keeps constructing a theological and praxical unity for the church.

FUNCTION

While the *Confession's* relation to time and its positioning as a privileged text have garnered it the authority it requires to serve as a condition for unity within the church, its relationship to function, ironically enough, has served to curb that authority just enough to make it credible in an Anabaptist-minded church. As already noted in the foregoing genealogy, throughout the process of considering whether a new confession was needed and of writing the confession, many people expressed concern about the functions that the new confession would serve. Indeed, about the first thing that the Confession of Faith Committee did was read and discuss Howard Loewen's essay on the functions of American Mennonite confessions.^[63] The fruit of that work can be found already in the fifth paragraph of the introduction to the *Confession* where the functions of confession are listed. Again, those functions include the following: "guidelines for interpretation of Scripture," "guidance for belief and practice," "foundation for unity within and among churches," "outline for instructing new church members and for sharing information with inquirers," "an updated

interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times" and "help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians and people of other faiths."^[64] What this list of functions does is tell the church for what purposes the *Confession* may properly be used. It serves as a set of possibilities as well as limits of use. Especially to the extent that the list limits the kinds of uses to which the *Confession* is properly put, it also restricts the authority of the text. What this list in effect says is that this text is authoritative with respect to these functions but not others. It may be mobilized as the privileged text when instructing new members or interpreting Scripture or discussing Mennonite belief and practice with others. However, because this list is finite it implies that the *Confession* is not authoritative in matters beyond this list. To be sure, it is no accident that Mennonite Church USA, with its deep roots in Anabaptism and its suspicion of especially churchly authority, sought to limit the authority of one of its especially authoritative texts.

Having said all that, however, we have also seen in this genealogy that the *Confession* has been put to uses at least not expressly stated in that finite list. Indeed, Joe Roos seems to hit the mark when he says, "I've heard it argued by delegates within AMC and many people outside of AMC, especially older members who participated in the creation of these documents, that they were never intended to be used the way that AMC (and others) have used them."^[65] One of the ways that the *Confession* has come to serve functions beyond that list was by way of its inclusion in the membership guidelines. With that inclusion the *Confession* was inserted into a mode of church business for which it was not intended—namely, a process for determining at the very least which pastors may serve the church. Additionally, with the action of the Alleghany Mennonite Conference delegates in that March 2005 meeting, the *Confession* was mobilized for yet another function—namely, the removal of a congregation from active membership in its conference. Given comments and claims made in minutes, reports and correspondence of the committee that wrote the confession, as well as the committees and general boards that gave them that task, it seems accurate to say that these are functions for which the *Confession* was not intended. In these ways, then, the church or parts of the church have expanded the authority of the *Confession*. Indeed, amid the exigencies that the church has faced over time, it may be fair to say that the church's common 1995 confession has changed a good deal with respect to matters of whom we are willing to include in its provisional unity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As a biblical people Anabaptist-Mennonites want the Scriptures to speak with authority and relevance. We want to know with some confidence what we believe we are called to as the body of Christ. Yet, we want our convictions to speak with significance in the moment within which we find ourselves. While we certainly want to say that "Jesus is Lord" as the creeds do, we want also to say more—for instance, that the Jesus who is Lord is the prince of peace and, as such, calls us to a defenseless witness to the reign of God. Thus, as we well know, we are a confessional people rather than a creedal people. We say with great conviction what we know to be true. Yet, we do so in the mode of a kind of discourse, a confessional discourse, that, in the course of time, will not stick. Perhaps that is as it should be given the sort of truth we seek to confess. As Pilgram Marpeck taught us: "The living cross and hand of Christ shows the way, does not stand immovable in one place, never has and never will, for it is itself the way from which the truth comes and is the truth from which life comes. This life comes from faith and faith gives birth to all virtue and the knowledge of Christ."^[66] If Marpeck is right about the kind of truth to which we seek to witness in our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and, indeed, in all that we do as a church of

Jesus Christ, then we should not be alarmed that our common confession is also on the move. Indeed, it just may be the case that we have figured out something important as a confessional church-that if you want to name God's truth-on-the-move then you must be willing to subject yourself to its rather unruly messianic impulses.

Now, none of this is to give us any excuse to make our common confession say anything we want it to say or serve any function we fancy. On the contrary, when we recognize that the text is not fixed but, instead, is subject not only to the messianic authority of our savior but also to our own will, whether individually as when a pastor makes a pronouncement from a pulpit on its authority or when a conference takes an action to use it in a new way, then we are obliged also to recognize and take responsibility for the work we do to and by that text. In the end we will be held accountable for the uses to which we put our common confession.

[*] Susan Biesecker-Mast is a professor of communication at Bluffton University and is currently finishing a manuscript on the visual rhetorics of tourism in Amish Country. 1. Everett J. Thomas, "Rules Help Discernment," *DreamSeeker Magazine* 6, no. 1 (2006), 32-33. *Return to [Text](#)*

[2] . Ibid., 33. *Return to [Text](#)*

[3] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[4] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[5] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[6] . Taken from the "Confession of Faith Study Committee Report and Proposal to Formulate a New Confession of Faith" found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. The members of that committee included C.J. Dyck, S. David Garber, Helmut Harder, Beulah Hostetler, Marlin E. Miller, Jose Ortiz, Sue Clemmer Steiner and Ted VanderEnde. *Return to [Text](#)*

[7] . Ibid. (emphasis added). Importantly, this statement appeared in the original report of the committee and then was reiterated in a letter that Marlin E. Miller (chair) and Helmut Harder (secretary) sent to Ivan Kauffman of the M.C. General Board and Vern Preheim of the G.C. General Board. *Return to [Text](#)*

[8] . The earliest document in the Mennonite Church USA Archives is dated Oct. 7, 1982. That document is a paper by Glendon Blosser of Virginia Mennonite Conference apparently written in response to an inquiry by the Council of Faith, Life and Strategy concerning whether the 1963 confession was in need of revision. Glendon Blosser's document, "Proposed Response to the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy Regarding Revision of the 1963 Mennonite Confession of Faith," was found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. The Council on Faith, Life and Strategy conducted a survey among Mennonite Church conferences in the early 1980s in which they asked, "Shall we revise the 1963 Confession of Faith?" Seven conferences replied in the affirmative and four in the negative. Taken from "Excerpts from CFLS Minutes with Regard to Study of Confession of Faith," which were found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. *Return to [Text](#)*

[9] . Listed here are the reasons given repeatedly for writing a new confession in the survey that the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy conducted. Ibid. This appears to be James Lapp's understanding of one key reason for writing a new confession when he says, "As the church changed, the 1963 confession of the MC and the even older confession of the GCMC, were no longer adequate for the teaching purposes of the church. So the impulse to do some updating for a new time was also there."-Personal communication by e-mail, May 18, 2006. *Return to [Text](#)*

[10] . James Lapp put it this way: "this was an era of enormous acculturation that forced us to reframe what we believe." Further, he said, "As we became more engaged in mission, we were constrained to develop a theology that could speak to the

world we encountered with greater integrity."-Ibid. [Return to Text](#)

[11] . Taken from the minutes of the Dec. 14-15, 1984, meeting of the Confession of Faith Study Committee found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is labeled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[12] . Personal communication by e-mail, May 18, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[13] . That Brunk's pamphlet was influential is indicated by the fact that the General Board of the Mennonite Church drafted an official response to the pamphlet. See, "Pre-Assembly General Board Meeting Deals with Tough Issues," *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 30, 1983, 600. [Return to Text](#)

[14] . In a *Gospel Herald* article Richard Kauffman attributed the development of the Mennonite Church conferences to the controversy that Brunk's pamphlet had inspired: "In response to the 'Crisis' controversy, the General Board [of the Mennonite Church] launched plans for a consultation to air with Brunk and others the theological issues he has raised." Richard A. Kauffman, "For the General Board, Problems Come in Threes," *Gospel Herald*, Dec. 6, 1983, 852. In another article in the *Gospel Herald*, Larry Cornies, news services director for the General Conference, was identified as having explained the catalyst for the G.C. conferences this way: "First, there is tension and misunderstanding between persons who participate in peace demonstrations involving civil disobedience and those who think such actions are inappropriate for Christians. Second, a GC congregation withdrew from the conference last fall over the issue of homosexuality. This congregation . . . had gotten the impression from the discussion at Bethlehem 83 on the human sexuality study that the General Conference is moving in the direction of accepting homosexuality." "General Conference to Sponsor 'Dialogue on Faith' Sessions," *Gospel Herald*, May 29, 1984, 391. [Return to Text](#)

[15] . For the Conversations on Faith, "The goal is that the theological consultation will bring about greater clarity and unity in faith, resulting from examination of Scripture and our own theological heritage." Richard A. Kauffman, "Greater Unity Is the Goal of Theological Consultation," *Gospel Herald*, Feb. 14, 1984, 113. For the Dialogues on Faith, the "overarching goal [was] 'to allow the unity of the Spirit to hold us together while we open dialogue on diverse interpretations in discerning the biblical truth and practice.'"-"General Conference to Sponsor 'Dialogue on Faith' Sessions," 251. [Return to Text](#)

[16] . Taken from the "Confession of Faith Study Committee Report and Proposal to Formulate a New Confession of Faith" found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[17] . Ibid. [Return to Text](#)

[18] . These letters are available in the Mennonite Church Archives among Marlin E. Miller's papers and among the files of the General Board of the Mennonite Church pertaining to the *Confession of Faith*. [Return to Text](#)

[19] . Drafts of articles were presented, for instance, at Normal '89 and Sioux Falls '92. But discussion of the work of the Confession of Faith Committee already took place at Ames '85. "Ames 85 Update: General Assembly to Take Big Agenda," *Gospel Herald*, July 16, 1985. [Return to Text](#)

[20] . Such letters, which appeared in "Readers Say" in the *Gospel Herald*, for instance, and to which Marlin Miller, chair of the Confession of Faith Committee, responded, can be found among Marlin E. Miller's papers. See "Marlin E. Miller, Papers, 1960-1994" Hist. Mss. 1-791, Box 12, folder 41, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[21] . All of the individual responses and Steve Nolt's report compiling those responses are available in "Marlin E. Miller, Papers, 1960-1994" Hist. Mss. 1-791, Box 13, in binders, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. The seriousness with which congregations and individuals took this conversation with the committee on their work is apparent in the comments given. They include affirmative comments on the overall work of the committee, specific recommendations for changes in wording, and substitute confessions to questions regarding the age of the committee members. [Return to Text](#)

[22] . For assessments of the Conversations on Faith and the Dialogues on Faith, see the following: "General Conference to Sponsor 'Dialogue on Faith' Sessions," Daniel Hertzler, "The Conversations at Laurelville," *Gospel Herald*, Mar. 13, 1984; Steve Shenk, "Conversations on Faith II: Differences Persist but Mennonites Try to Respect Each Other's Views," *Gospel Herald*, Mar. 19, 1985; Muriel Thiessen Stackley, "Dialogue on Faith a Microcosm of Conference," *The Mennonite*, Nov. 20,

1984; Bernie Wiebe, "We Talked of Faith, but Dialogue Still Needs to Happen," *The Mennonite*, Nov. 28, 1984. By the third Conversations on Faith, attendance had dropped from nearly 200 to 140. Steve Shenk, "Conversations on Faith III Tackles Divisive 'Inerrancy' Question," *Gospel Herald*, Mar. 18, 1986. [Return to Text](#)

[23] . These functions are largely borrowed from Howard J. Loewen, "One Lord, One Church, One Hope: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in America: An Introduction," *MQR* 57 (July 1983), 265-281. Loewen identifies the following five purposes: "defense of faith and Mennonite identity . . . ; church discipline and instruction . . . ; unity of the church . . . ; evangelism . . . ; [and] authority of scripture." (274). Loewen notes "Church discipline and instruction is the most uniform purpose expressed [across Mennonite confessions], but also decreases in emphasis" over time (274). Interestingly, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* identifies a sixth function, which is to "give an updated interpretation of belief and practice amidst changing times." See the introduction to *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), 8. [Return to Text](#)

[24] . *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 8. [Return to Text](#)

[25] . Carla Reimer, "MC/GC Task Force on Cooperation Holds First Meeting to Discuss Progress," *Gospel Herald*, Feb. 10, 1987, 96. The first meeting of the MC/GC Task Force on Cooperation was held on Dec. 5-6, 1986. The first meeting of the Confession of Faith Committee was held on Feb. 12-14, 1987. [Return to Text](#)

[26] . The Confession of Faith Study Committee recognized, for instance, a host of differences, including cultural milieus, church polity, practices like foot washing and age for baptism. Still, they said, "On the majority of issues, however, we are at the same place and should work together on a confession." Taken from the minutes of the Confession of Faith Study Committee dated Dec. 14-15, 1984, which can be found in Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. In a carefully reasoned paper prepared by George R. Brunk III, he argued that confessions have long served as the sign of church unity (referring specifically to the Dordrecht Confession of 1632, which explicitly named that purpose). Brunk then went on to discuss several theological positions that the two denominations share. Brunk agreed with Howard Loewen's view that there were deep connections among the confessional traditions of Mennonites such that Brunk concluded the following: "If these remarks are possible for the wider spectrum of the Mennonite family, they are also relevant to the relationship of General Conference and Mennonite Church." This was taken from George R. Brunk III, "Theological Implications for an Integration of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church," which he submitted to the M.C. and G.C. General Boards. This document is located in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1987-1989, Box 1, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[27] . Personal communication by e-mail, May 18, 2006. Preheim's view is confirmed in a letter he wrote to Ivan Kauffman (who was then a member of the M.C. General Board) at the time about the G.C. General Board's interest in a new confession: "we see working out a common confession of faith as being strategic to bringing our two conferences more closely together." The letter was dated Nov. 1, 1983, and can be found in Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. In the minutes of both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church at Wichita '95, the two denominations affirmed identical actions "to move toward the integration of our two denominations." In that action explicit reference was made to "the affirmation of a common *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*" as key grounds for moving ahead with integration. See the Proceedings of Mennonite Church General Assembly, July 25-30, 1995, p. 34, and Minutes of the General Conference Mennonite Church, July 25-30, 1995, p. 19. [Return to Text](#)

[28] . Other documents referred to in the Membership Guidelines in this connection include, of course, the Purdue and Saskatoon statements on human sexuality. [Return to Text](#)

[29] . Personal communication by e-mail, May 30, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[30] . Personal communication by e-mail, June 5, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[31] . Minutes of the Constituency Leaders Council, Oct. 7-9, 2005. [Return to Text](#)

[32] . Jeff Jones, "Observations, Complaints and Requested Actions Regarding Hyattsville Mennonite Church's Acceptance of Persons in Active Homosexual Relationships as Members and Subsequent Appointments as Congregational Delegates." This document was included as exhibit 1 in the docket of materials sent to A.M.C. delegates in preparation for their Mar. 5, 2005,

delegate meeting at Pittsburgh Mennonite Church in which the action was taken saying that H.M.C.'s practices were "inconsistent with MC USA's 'Membership Guidelines.'" This document was made available through the chair of the Faith, Life and Procedures commission, Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[33] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[34] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[35] . Taken from a memo written by the two witnesses, Steve Heatwole and Donna Mast, to Jeff Jones, Enos Tice and Kurt Horst, with copies to the Hyattsville pastors and the congregational chair. This memo was included in the docket for delegates to the Mar. 5, 2005, meeting and were made available by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[36] . Taken from a letter written by Enos Tice (chair of the Faith, Life and Procedures commission of A.M.C. and on behalf of that commission) to the Hyattsville Mennonite Church. This letter was also included in the docket to A.M.C. delegates for the Mar. 5, 2005, meeting and was made available by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[37] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[38] . Taken from the Feb. 1, 2005, cover letter that accompanied Hyattsville's official response to the Faith, Life and Procedures commission. This letter was also included in the docket of materials to the delegates to the Mar. 5, 2005, A.M.C. assembly and was made available by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[39] . Taken from the official letter of response from the Hyattsville church to the Faith, Life and Procedures commission of A.M.C. This letter was also included in the docket of materials to the delegates to the March 5, 2005, A.M.C. assembly and was made available by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[40] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[41] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[42] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[43] . Taken from "Consistency Questions with Official MC USA Teaching Position: A Look from an Historical Perspective," written and submitted by the Hyattsville church to Allegheny Mennonite Conference and sent to delegates in preparation for the Mar. 5, 2005, meeting. This document was made available to me by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[44] . Jeff Jones, presentation to the delegates of A.M.C., Mar. 5, 2005. The text of this presentation is available in the A.M.C. office and was made available by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[45] . Joe Roos, "Hyattsville Mennonite Membership Practice and MC USA Documents on Congregational Membership." The text of this presentation is available in the A.M.C. office and was made available by Enos Tice. *Return to [Text](#)*

[46] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[47] . As quoted in Roos. Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[48] . Ibid. *Return to [Text](#)*

[49] . The delegates of A.M.C. who viewed the *Confession* as only descriptive would find others who would agree with them around the church and through the church's history. In 1982 as the Mennonite Church was beginning to test the idea of a new confession, Glendon Blosser of Virginia Mennonite Conference wrote a paper and submitted it to the Mennonite Church's Council on Faith, Life and Strategy saying that "A confession should stand as a dated document that is the best expression of the church at that time of history." This statement was taken from a document entitled "Proposed Response to the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy Regarding Revision of the 1963 Mennonite Confession of Faith." The document was dated Oct. 7, 1982, and was found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. According to Vern Preheim in a personal communication by e-mail on May 18, 2006, "For most General Conference pastors and leaders the confession was seen as

descriptive and used accordingly. That understanding continues in Mennonite Church for the congregations formerly GC." [Return to Text](#)

[50] . Personal communication with Enos Tice by e-mail, May 19, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[51] . Personal communication with Kurt Horst by e-mail, May 23, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[52] . Personal communication with Joe Roos by e-mail, May 17, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[53] . Personal communication with James Lapp by e-mail, May 18, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[54] . This practice was noted by the Confession of Faith Study Committee: "It is further observed that in the General Conference there is a tendency to downplay overarching confessions and to formulate confession on a congregational level." This was taken from the minutes of the Dec. 14-15, 1984, meeting of the study committee, which can be found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[55] . *Mennonite Confession of Faith*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1963), 3. Emphasis added. [Return to Text](#)

[56] . *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 7-8. [Return to Text](#)

[57] . We see this logic clearly articulated in a letter from Council on Faith and Life of Virginia Mennonite Conference to Council of Faith, Life and Strategy dated Oct. 25, 1982: "In writing such a confession there should be some attention to the philosophy which lies back of the endeavor [sic], so that a balance is established between abiding elements of biblical principles and the application of principles to current issues and the language in which this expression is couched." This letter can be found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[58] . Tim Lichti and Nancy Kauffmann, both of whom are conference regional ministers for Indiana Michigan Conference, report this dynamic in their conference with congregations holding to the 1963 confession and then leaving the conference. Personal communication by e-mail with both individually on May 24, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[59] . "Hence, it seems some pastors/conferences are picking and choosing if they want to teach from the 1963 Mennonite Confession of Faith versus the 1995 COF." Personal communication with Enos Tice on May 19, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[60] . Taken from letter dated Jan. 15, 1986, written by Wayne North, executive secretary of the Mennonite Church, to Bill Wiebe, member of the Board of Reference and Council of the Mennonite Brethren Churches. This letter can be found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[61] . Taken from excerpts of the minutes of the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy dated Oct. 28-31, 1982, which can be found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is entitled "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [Return to Text](#)

[62] . *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 72. [Return to Text](#)

[63] . Loewen, "One Lord, One Church, One Hope: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in America-An Introduction." [Return to Text](#)

[64] . *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 8. [Return to Text](#)

[65] . Personal communication by e-mail with Joe Roos, May 17, 2006. [Return to Text](#)

[66] . Pilgram Marbeck, et al., *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and His Circle, Anabaptist Texts in Translation*, 1. (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1999), 29. ?? ?? ?? ?? 396 The Mennonite Quarterly Review 403 A Genealogy of the Confession of Faith 371 MQR 81 (July 2007)