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COMMUNITY
BASED RESEARCH



Exploring Congregational Use of the MB Confession of Faith: Past, Present, Future

Summary Report – February 2022

Introduction to Slide Deck



- This slide deck is a summary report of an independent research study called *Exploring Congregational Use of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Confession of Faith*
- The study was funded by the [Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission](#) with in-kind contributions from those on the next slide
- The study was led by Brad Sumner (Lead Pastor at [Jericho Ridge Community Church](#)) and Rich Janzen (Executive Director at the [Centre for Community Based Research](#))

Who Was Involved



Study Research Team

Leads

- Brad Sumner
- Rich Janzen

Peer Researchers

- Karissa Durant
- Lee Kosa
- David Manafo
- Jeff Martens
- Keith Reed
- Brad Sumner
- Aaron Thiessen
- Tabitha VandenEnden

CMU student

- Brooklyn Friesen



Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) provided some financial support for student involvement in supplement to the MBHS grant.

CBBR staff support

- Janna Martin



The [Centre for Community Based Research](#) (CBBR) is a non-profit organization located on the University of Waterloo campus. Established in 1982, its mission is to build more responsive and supportive communities. It brought backbone coordination support to the study.

Study Advisory Committee

- Karla Braun
- David Chow
- Paul Doerksen
- Sherri Guenther-Trautwein
- Doug Heidebrecht
- Mary Anne Isaak
- J Janzen
- Richard Lougheed
- Sam Reimer

Contents of Slide Deck



- Rationale: Why this study
- Overview: How the study was conducted
- Findings: What we learned through the study
- Implications: What it means for the MB family

Study Rationale

- Background
- What we do and don't know
- Study purpose





Background

- The [Canadian MB Confession of Faith](#) declares the shared convictions of MBs in Canada defining our theological identity, and is a guide for biblical interpretation and living out our Christian faith (CCMBC 2018)
- It includes 18 articles in both a [long](#) and [short](#) version, with accompanying [introduction, commentary and pastoral applications](#), and [liturgical readings](#)
- It stands alongside other global Anabaptist confessions/shared convictions (i.e., [International Community of Mennonite Brethren - ICOMB](#); [Mennonite World Conference](#)) (Heidebrecht 2019)
- Canadian MBs occasionally revise the Confession of Faith for a variety of reasons under the leadership of the National Faith and Life Team (most recently, Article 8 on Baptism)
- But how exactly do MB congregations “use” the Confession of Faith in their thinking and acting?

What We Know



We know from the literature that in general:

- Most of what is written about the Confession of Faith focuses on the denominational or individual levels
- Discussion about the Confession of Faith often emerges in response to specific issues of concern (e.g., women in ministry, baptism, love & non-resistance, LGBTQ+ inclusion)
- One overarching theme is the tension in how the Confession of Faith functions (e.g., whether it is descriptive or prescriptive; whether it is a static or living document; whether some articles are more important than others; whether or not members of local congregations are invited to affirm their alignment with all or some of the theological convictions expressed; whether the process or outcome or revision is more important)
- Despite these tensions in how it is lived out, the Confession of Faith itself is generally seen to be an integral part of the Canadian MB family (e.g., it connects us and brings cohesion, it trains us in humility, it encourages a community hermeneutic, etc.)

As a point of interest, just over half of the 211 MB congregations with websites acknowledge the Confession of Faith, typically by linking to the CCMBC website (Heidebrecht 2018)



Gaps in What We Know

- However, when it comes specifically to how congregations live out the Confession of Faith, we know much less
- In fact, we found only one document that specifically researched MB congregations (Kosa 2021). This unpublished document briefly scanned 10 MB Canadian congregations finding that congregations apply the Confession of Faith in different (sometimes divergent) ways, that congregations often create their own internal ranking system (emphasizing some parts while deemphasizing other parts), and that some identify with other Confessions
- So, while we know that the Confession of Faith seems important to the Canadian MB family, we don't really have an in-depth picture of how it is actually being lived out "on the ground"
- The purpose of this study was to hear from MB pastors themselves about how they see their congregations using the Confession of Faith

Study Purpose



To fill this knowledge gap, a small group of curious MB pastors in Canada decided that it would be a good idea to do an in-depth qualitative study. They invited others to join them on a research team and an advisory committee. Together they agreed that the purpose of the study would be:

- To explore the diverse ways that Canadian MB congregations have used and are using the MB Confession of Faith in congregational life.
- This exploration could be helpful in supporting congregational, provincial, and national leaders to: 1) facilitate Canadian MBs to engage with the Confession of Faith, and 2) learn how to live with diversity and difference.



Main Research Questions

Flowing from the study purpose, the researchers and advisory committee determined that the study would answer 3 main research questions (MRQ):

1. How have MB congregations historically used the MB Confession of Faith to shape and guide their theological identity, biblical interpretation, and how they live out their Christian faith? (recent past)
2. How do Canadian MB congregations currently use the MB Confession of Faith to shape and guide their theological identity, biblical interpretation, and how they live out their Christian faith? (present)
3. What are the implications to the answers above for how national, provincial and congregational MB leaders can best negotiate diverse congregational usage of the MB Confession of Faith? (future)

Study Overview

- Research approach
- Research methods
- Limitations

Research Approach



This study used a **community-based approach** to research that:

1. is driven by the interests of those affected by the topic of study and leads to their self-determination
2. facilitates the meaningful participation of stakeholders throughout the research process
3. is action-oriented in providing practical evidence that is useful for positive change

Janzen 2019; Janzen, Ochocka & Stobbe 2016

Implementing this Approach



Advisory Committee

Guiders

- Help researchers to understand the context
- Shape the way information is gathered and understood
- Support knowledge mobilization
- Three meetings throughout the project
- Membership included a mix of stakeholders in the Canadian MB family (pastors, educators, national leaders, etc.)

Research Team

Doers

- Prepare meeting agendas, facilitate meetings, and send materials for review ahead of time
- Carry out research tasks: information gathering, data analysis, and sharing of findings
- Facilitated by Brad/Rich and included a CMU student, 8 peer researchers (mostly MB pastors), and one other CCBR researcher

Study Methodology



The study collected information in two different ways. Data gathering methods included:

1. Literature Review

- Bi-national (Canada/US) review of academic and grey literature
- Review conducted by a CMU student

2. Qualitative Interviews

- 17 in-depth individual interviews with purposively sampled MB pastors across Canada using a semi-structured interview guide
- Interviews conducted by trained peer researchers (i.e., mostly other MB pastors)



Literature Review Process

- Major search terms included "Mennonite Brethren," "Mennonite Brethren Congregation," "MB Confession of Faith," "Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith," "MB Confession of Faith Congregation," and "MB Congregation Confession of Faith."
- Sources used were from books, journal articles, MB Herald articles and unpublished documents
- The review focused on how the sources answered the first two main research questions
- Number of useful sources: 11 (see references at end of slide deck)
- While books and articles reference the Confession of Faith, very little is written about MB congregations and their interaction with the Confession of Faith.



Interview Process

- Ethics approval received from the [Community Research Ethics Office](#)
- Eight peer researchers participated (online training & debrief session provided)
- Peer researchers identified potential participants (supplemented by advisory committee) according to sampling frame
- Peer researchers were assigned to one-to-one interviews each 45-90 minutes long following ethical procedures (e.g., free & informed consent; confidentiality; protected data storage)
- Interviews were transcribed using *Temi* software before conducting thematic analysis by main interview question.

Peer Researchers

-Karissa Durant
-Lee Kosa
-David Manafo
-Jeff Martens
-Keith Reed
-Brad Sumner
-Aaron Thiessen
-Tabitha VandenEnden

Individual Interviews Completed

Name of Congregation*	City, Province
Reality Church	Vancouver, BC
South Abbotsford Church	Abbotsford, BC
Northview Community Church	Abbotsford, BC
Pacific Grace MB Church	Vancouver, BC
The Neighbourhood Church	Nanaimo, BC
Kelowna Gospel Fellowship	Kelowna, BC
River West Christian Church	Edmonton, AB
Parkland Community Church	Yorkton, SK
North Kildonan MB Church	Winnipeg, MB
The Meeting Place	Winnipeg, MB
Evergreen Heights Christian Fellowship	Simcoe, ON
Waterloo MB Church	Waterloo, ON
Grantham MB Church	St Catharines, ON
The Gathering	Ottawa, ON
L' Intersection	Montreal, QB
Gateway Church	Moncton, NB
The Well	Halifax, NS



Sampling Criteria

Pastors of Canadian MB congregations with a diversity of perspectives, including:

- Geographic location
- Size of congregation
- Urban/rural
- Theological leanings
- Membership composition
- Gender of pastor
- Age of pastor

*Congregation names are used by permission, while pastors who were interviewed remain anonymous.

Summary of Work Plan



1

Sept-Oct 2021

Literature Review

- Bi-national (Canada/US) review of academic and grey literature (e.g., periodicals)
- Answers MRQ #1
- Conducted by CMU student
- Also submitted ethical review during this phase ([CREO](#))

2

Oct-Dec 2021

Scan and Interviews

- Review current scans of congregational CoF use
- Hold/analyze in-depth individual interviews with purposively sampled MB pastors across Canada
- Answers MRQ #2 & #3
- Conducted by trained peer researchers

3

Jan-Feb 2022

Forum and Dissemination

- Hold virtual forum(s) to share/verify findings and invite feedback
- Share findings with other audiences
- Carried out by research team/advisory committee



Study Limitations

- All studies have strengths and limitations in what they can achieve
- This was an exploratory qualitative study using purposive sampling which is good for providing in-depth insight into a diversity of selected MB congregations
- However, the findings are not representative of, and can't be generalized to, the breadth of Canadian MB congregations
- If there is interest, future research could survey all MB congregations to gain this fuller understanding across the Canadian MB family



Study Findings

- Familiarity with the Confession of Faith
- Using the Confession of Faith (identity, interpretation, living out our faith)
 - Diversity of perspectives



Familiarity

Before diving into how congregations use the Confession of Faith, we thought it would be first good to ask pastors how familiar their congregations were with it. We learned that:

- Congregants are generally limited in their familiarity of the Confession of Faith, particularly among those not raised in a MB church
- Familiarity tends to raise with level of responsibility (attender, member, educator, deacon, elder, pastor)
- Some pastors are not concerned with this lack of familiarity (and they themselves not that familiar with it), but others saw this as concerning, with a few intentionally making efforts for congregants to engage more with the Confession of Faith
- Congregational familiarity is often linked to pastoral interest in the Confession of Faith
- Reasons for the lack of familiarity include: inaccessible language, little interest in “doctrine” (as opposed to the application of faith), other ways to express core beliefs



Familiarity

We also learned that:

- The Confession of Faith typically runs implicitly in the background of a congregation ("operating system"), occasionally coming to the foreground
- It most often comes to the fore during rites of passage (baptism/membership, credentialing) or if conflict emerges. In some congregations it is explicitly acknowledged in preaching/liturgy/teaching, or reviewed by leaders to ensure preaching/liturgy/teaching aligns with it ("a reference")
- Congregants might selectively engage with the Confession of Faith on a specific topic
- Those interviewed generally recognized that the Confession of Faith is not intended to be a creed and also that it is not intended to be an expression of systematic theology.



Using the Confession of Faith

The core of our exploration focused on how congregations use the Confession of Faith. We probed three categories, consistent with the Canadian MB Conference's introductory [Nature and Function of the Confession](#) document:

- 1) Identity function: How is the Confession of Faith used to form or shape the shared convictions or theological identity of your congregation?
- 2) Biblical interpretation function: How is the Confession of Faith used to guide your congregation in its interpretation (understanding) and application (discernment) of Scripture?
- 3) Living out our faith function: How is the Confession of Faith used to guide the behaviour and practices of your congregation in living out the Christian faith (discipleship)?



Using the Confession of Faith

Before reporting on these three categories, first here are some general observations about how the Confession of Faith is used:

- There was a general appreciation for and perceived usefulness of the Confession of Faith among pastors, even if not among congregants
- There were diverse understandings of how the Confession of Faith is to be used, often expressed via metaphors
- There were different levels of engagement across congregations
- Posture matters: How leaders interact with the Confession of Faith influences congregational engagement
- Congregational engagement might change over time, especially if there is a change in leadership
- Some younger people or those in emergent congregations see the Confession of Faith as less useful given fluid convictions and/or an emphasis on relationships (it's like a "drivers test to pass" in membership class and then "you drive however you want", or a cell phone "contract" that sits in a drawer somewhere)



Using the Confession of Faith

1) Identity function

There were a range of opinions across (sometimes within) congregations about **what the Confession of Faith is:**

- A description of who we are (a "token" which reflects us and our traditions but does not shape us) as compared to a prescription of who we should be (helping to shape us)
- A clarifying of who we are as compared to an invitational conversation starter ("baseline")
- A static identity marker as compared to a historic trajectory shaped by those on the journey ("living document", "a community consensus" as articulated in 1902, 1974, 1999)
- Something we receive and that requires our submission (similar to "language") as compared to something that we can question and wrestle with



Using the Confession of Faith

1) Identity function

There were different opinions about **how the Confession of Faith operates** given the growing diversity (“big tent”) within congregations and the denomination:

- For some, it is seen to bring unity and a connection to the broader MB community (“binds us together”) as it sets clear gatekeeping boundaries (“filters” out non-congruent theology)
- For others, it does not (or cannot be expected to) bring unity with some concerns that it is used as a “weapon” to exclude and shut down conversation
- But most are somewhere in the middle, grappling with how it can connect us together but still allow individual expression (“Venn diagram”; “tether”; “useful map [of the territory] but not the territory [itself]”)
- Often these types of discussions take place during membership, covenanting, or conflict moments within congregational/denominational life



Using the Confession of Faith

1) Identity function

Others noticed that the identity function of the Confession of Faith is influenced by **internal dynamics** within the congregation:

- Some congregations emphasize belonging, with membership (& confessional “agreement”) signaling a sense of affinity to the community more than theological alignment
- Sometimes there are generational differences with older members assuming authority of the Confession of Faith while younger members are freer to struggle with its statements
- Culture can come into play, both among those shifting away from Mennonite ethnicity and those trying to translate it into their own unique ethno-specific context
- For some congregations, the Confession of Faith is helpful in articulating who they are to external people (“a flag” or identity marker on a publicly facing website)
- Finally, it was sometimes hard to know to what extent identity was linked to the Confession of Faith or to the many other influences within the MB or wider Canadian Christian culture.



Using the Confession of Faith

2) Biblical interpretation function

Biblical interpretation was a second area of exploration. Some comments related to the **framing of Biblical interpretation** within the Confession of Faith:

- There was a general affirmation of the emphasis on a “community hermeneutic” (as opposed to relying on expert-driven or individual interpretations) but people are vague as to what this means in practice with respect to a document like the Confession of Faith
- Some saw the Confession of Faith as interpretively vague in many aspects (which was viewed as both frustrating and brilliant)
- Some recognized the evolving nature of interpretation - that every generation needs to give it “fresh breath” so that interpretations remain meaningful
- Some recognized the increased theological influences from outside the MB world which sometimes renders it as secondary for guiding interpretation
- Many recognized that it uses a Biblical confessional approach (“Biblical anchor”), while some appreciated this approach others cautioned against it or questioned why we could not be creedal on core aspects in honour of the broader Christian tradition



Using the Confession of Faith

2) Biblical interpretation function

Other comments related to **when the Confession of Faith is used** in Biblical interpretation:

- Pastors range from frequently looking to the Confession of Faith or the commentary for guidance (especially for sermons), while others never do
- It was seen to be most often working in the background indirectly (a “dotted line” not solid line to interpretation) or reactively when questions arise
- Sometimes it was viewed as helpful in setting parameters and highlighting particularities relative to other Christian interpretations (like a unique “accent” in language)



Using the Confession of Faith

2) Biblical interpretation function

Finally, there were differences of opinion on **how the Confession of Faith is used** in Biblical interpretation:

- For some it provides unified clarity ("it holds us together" "non-negotiables"), while for others it is what facilitates "wrestling" and "conversation" in interpretation
- For some it is a "guidebook" and "not a straight jacket" in directing Biblical interpretation (a principle-based reading), while others saw it as articulating "shared beliefs" that should be formally agreed to (a rigid reading)
- Some noted the distinction between a "centre set" versus a "bounded set" positioning and how this distinction influences how interpretation is facilitated
- There was a recognition that not all members (including pastors) always agree with everything in it, but typically people are not in the habit of publicly contradicting it



Using the Confession of Faith

3) Living out our faith function

A third area of exploration was how the Confession of Faith influences discipleship efforts within the congregation. First some **general comments**:

- It was usually seen to be implicit in discipleship activities rather than explicitly referenced or consulted.
- Some questioned whether it has any influence in shaping people's behaviours, given the many other more direct discipleship influences (preaching, classes, mentorship, etc.)
- Congregational leaders were most likely to use it directly in discipleship, typically aiding their discernment as a "guidepost", "resource" , or a check for "alignment"
- Adherence to Confessional lifestyle expectations was typically seen to be more stringent for leaders than for others in the congregation; for members than for general attenders.
- Sometimes congregations expected member lifestyle alignment, while the congregation itself was not in complete alignment (e.g., de-linking baptism/membership)



Using the Confession of Faith

3) Living out our faith function

Most of the comments, however, related to **specific practices** in congregational life where the Confession of Faith is used in discipleship:

- **Baptism/membership:** The most common moment where it is used, typically in membership or baptismal classes where people directly receive it, even discuss it
- **Preaching/teaching:** Consulted by some preachers in forming their sermon (or framing a sermon series), or by educators in developing discipleship curriculum
- **Worship liturgy:** A few pastors made use of the confessional liturgical readings or the summary version during worship services, while others did not know that the liturgical resource exists
- **Communion:** Less common were pastors who consulted or referenced it in preparing or leading the Lord's Supper.



Diversity of Perspectives

An overarching theme across the interviews was the diversity of perspectives on the Confession of Faith that exist across and within MB congregations. Our interviews probed about this diversity in terms of:

1. What parts of the Confession of Faith were most affirmed and what parts generated the most concerns/questions (**content** of the Confession of Faith)
2. How the diversity of perspectives were managed within the congregation (**processes** related to the Confession of Faith)



Diversity of Perspectives

Content of the Confession of Faith

The early articles of the Confession of Faith (articles #1-7) and Discipleship (article 10) were generally seen to be the most easily affirmed within and across congregations.

Issues that created the most inquiry and friction included:

- **LGBTQ+ issues (most often associated with Article 11 on Marriage, Singleness, and Family):** These were the most frequently mentioned issues in the interviews. A few simply identified these as a controversial issues, while most others noted how they were: 1) grappling with the expressions and limits of LGBTQ+ inclusion, pastoral care, the facilitating of constructive discussion given diverse opinions, or 2) calling for a deeper denominational conversation that includes a diversity of perspectives or that at least openly acknowledges and normalizes that some (many?) churches are wrestling with these issues.



Diversity of Perspectives

Content of the Confession of Faith (Continued)

Other articles that created inquiry and/or friction included:

- **Love and Nonresistance (Article 13)** This article was often seen to be the most recognizable (and misunderstood) Anabaptist distinction, seen positively by some while causing discomfort and disagreement for others, particularly those in the military/policing or from some cultural backgrounds
- **Christian Baptism (Article 8):** This article emerged in two ways: 1) the challenges of incorporating people who were baptized as infants, and 2) the relationship between baptism and membership with some appreciating the recent revision process while others still feeling the article too constraining
- **Other articles:** Less commonly raised were oath taking (in article #12), The Sanctity of Human Life (#14), The Lord's Day, Work, and Rest (#16) and Christ's Final Triumph (#18).

Finally, there was discussion about whether all articles were of equal importance (a “flat document”) or differentiated in some way. Some found the diagram in the [Nature & Functions](#) document helpful (where articles are placed in inner and outer circles) while others did not (seen as “want[ing] it both ways”). Others noted it blurred the distinction between a “statement” and “confession” of faith



Diversity of Perspectives

Processes related to the Confession of Faith

A great deal was spoken about how congregations manage situations of disagreement:

- Diversity of perspectives rise as congregations themselves become more diverse requiring intentional efforts to foster a culture where unity and the fruits of the Spirit are evident
- Causes of tension: Different assumptions (e.g., bounded vs center set; principled vs rigid; cultural bias), dual anabaptist-evangelical MB identity and outside influences; generational differences
- Different ways to respond if someone disagrees with or lives counter to the Confession: not make it an issue; but depending on the topic, enter into dialogue; limit leadership/membership; ask people to consider not being a member; or start a “slow process” of discipline
- Guiding principles: The centrality of Jesus; submission to community convictions; be open to learning & wrestling through issues; keep engaging despite disagreement; stress belonging over believing; avoid shame/condemnation; hold a long view; embrace diversity; learn to trust & live with diverse opinions; foreground assumptions: recognize unity comes through shared worship

Study Implications

- Challenges
- Guiding questions





Questions for Consideration

What are the implications of what we learned for the wider MB church family in Canada? To begin, consider what study findings say about the **challenges** faced by three levels of groups within our MB family:

- Congregations – In the absence of widely understood shared expectations and active conversations, there seems to be no consensus on how, when, or if the Confession of Faith is to be used. *Could more active guidance be provided to churches? How might it be received in the current climate?*
- Provincial – Provincial Faith & Life teams and Provincial staff are often seen as responsible for “gatekeeping” functions (via credentialing or intervention in times of theological conflict). *Could they play both a proactive and reactive role?*
- National – The need for both written theological clarity and practical resourcing to occur concurrently can make conversations feel slow. *Could the provision of strategic and timely theological resourcing help to reduce the sense of distance between local congregations and the NFLT?*



Questions for Consideration

Interview participants gave some ideas about how to address these challenges with the study's advisory committee adding their own insights. These are organized in two sections in the form of questions:

1) Guiding questions for **facilitating engagement** with the Confession of Faith

- How can we encourage more clarity and consistency about how congregations can or should use the Confession of Faith? How is this likely to be received?
- How do we address the general lack of awareness/interest in the Confession of Faith among many congregants?
- How do we encourage engagement with the Confession of Faith as a natural part and rhythm of congregational life in tandem with other practices of discipleship?
- How can we share promising practices of how congregations currently engage people with the Confession of Faith? (e.g., membership curricula; sermon series content)



Questions for Consideration

- How might the Confession of Faith (and its introduction) be written more accessibly and shared in more modern formats? (e.g., an Instagram account with "influencers")
- How can we more clearly express the relationship amongst and between the different articles? (e.g., creedal-leaning articles and discipleship-leaning articles?)
- What can the experiences of other denominations teach us about how congregants engage with a confession of faith as an identity-shaping / faith-shaping document?
- How do we engage pastoral leaders with the Confession of Faith in the midst of the many other aspects and influences of congregational life? Congregational members?
- If leadership familiarity is a predictor of congregational familiarity, how do we acclimate pastoral and congregational leaders who come from other traditions to the way in which the Confession functions? (principles for living with a living document)



Questions for Consideration

2) Guiding questions for **living with diversity and difference**

- How do we respond to dissonance within congregations / the denomination?
- How can we facilitate open conversation on controversial topics (currently Marriage, Singleness and Family; and to a lesser extent Love and Nonresistance)?
- Is constructive discussion about the Confession of Faith possible without a deeper commitment to stronger relationships? (Will revisions unify or further divide us?)
- How might a revision process be driven by something other than crisis or disagreement? (e.g., a rotating review schedule, regular meetings with clusters of pastors) How can we communicate the revision process more explicitly?
- How can emerging contemporary topics get on the discussion radar (e.g., gender identity, Indigenous reconciliation)?
- What principles should guide the flexibility/strictness of adherence, and how should we consistently respond when congregants/congregations question certain articles?



Questions for Consideration

- Are we engaging diverse and emerging voices to the table in confessional discussions? What happens when we don't? How best can we do this?
- How do we encourage commitment and submission to our shared convictions alongside our emphasis on an ongoing community hermeneutic?
- How do we facilitate a posture of humility and openness to listening and learning as we interact with others in Confessional conversation? (e.g., compassion and diversity training)
- What can we do to mitigate the pain and causalities that can come with disagreement and accusation?
- How do we ensure transparency so people feel they understand how decisions are being made related to the Confession of Faith (e.g., when churches are leaving the MB family)?
- What weight should we properly give the Confession of Faith as a unifying force among MBs? How should it work in tandem with other expressions of what bind us together?



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