

*We envision new, revitalized, and multiplying congregations extending God's kingdom*

## THE ROLE OF BISHOP IN A 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY MISSIONAL LANCASTER MENNONITE CONFERENCE

Boston

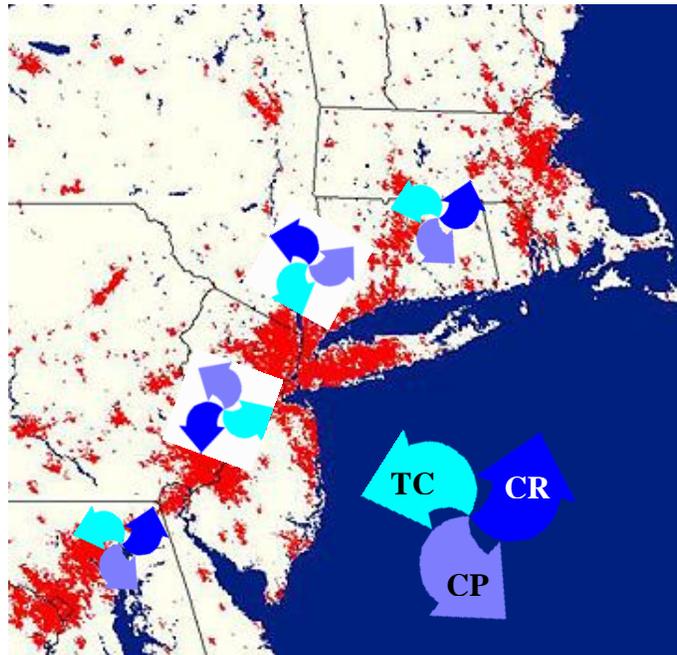


This nighttime satellite image shows the lights from the major metropolitan areas in the Northeast Corridor from Richmond, Virginia almost to Boston, Massachusetts.

Richmond

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53 As bishops consider their role as bishop, they need to ask each other how the office of bishop  
54 will lead a 21<sup>st</sup> century, missional, Lancaster Mennonite Conference forward with the three  
55 initiatives of Vision 2010: first, release the potential of Thriving Congregations (TC); second,  
56 initiate and resource Church Planting (CP); and third resource Church  
57 Revitalization (CR). The map at right  
58 shows the major metropolitan areas in red  
59 with the three Lancaster Conference  
60 initiatives overlaid upon the region.  
61 According to the LMC vision statement,  
62 “We envision new, revitalized, and  
63 multiplying congregations extending  
64 God’s kingdom.” New congregations are  
65 planted, plateaued or declining  
66 congregations are revitalized, and thriving  
67 congregations work to multiply  
68 themselves.  
69 themselves.



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71 A missional church recognizes that it is  
72 sent by a missionary God into the world to  
73 be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the  
74 Kingdom of God. Many voices from around the world in diverse traditions seem to conclude the  
75 same thing. To paraphrase Lawrence Chiles at the recent School for Apostles, the Holy Spirit, in  
76 various ways, is blowing the church into the communities of our own homes, across the street,  
77 and around the world.

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79 How will bishops partner with the work of the Spirit? How will bishops lead Lancaster  
80 Mennonite Conference into dynamic ministry that proclaims Jesus, that makes disciples who are  
81 baptized, and that teaches kingdom ways? How will bishops adjust their roles to increase their  
82 effectiveness as senders of God’s people to the places where the Spirit is blowing them? How  
83 will bishops promote and support a church planting strategy and a commitment to the  
84 revitalization of existing congregations? In the effort of constant discernment and the messiness  
85 of answers to these many missional questions, how will bishops also look after worship and  
86 nurture?

87  
88 While it may be true that Mennonites quickly place outreach to the lost aside if not called to keep  
89 it at the center, those who are most concerned about being sent as ambassadors of reconciliation  
90 certainly affirm the need to tend to the worship and nurture of the community that sends the  
91 ambassador. In this tension filled interplay between worship of God, nurture of faith, and witness  
92 in word and deed, structure must emerge to keep all three and to keep the tension between them  
93 all furious.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An adaptation of a quote by G.K. Chesterton from Erland Waltner, “Embracing Furious Opposites” from *The Work Is Thine O Christ*, 93. “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites by keeping them both and keeping them both furious.”

95 One can fairly ask why there is a need for change in the governance and structure of Lancaster  
96 Mennonite Conference now. Dale Stoltzfus provides a list of nine reasons why review is  
97 important at this time in his “Reflections” paper in Appendix 1. His first and most compelling  
98 reason identifies the “missional agenda” as the prime mover for change. While structural  
99 modifications have occurred over the last hundred years, the basic approach to governance has  
100 remained largely unchanged for perhaps 400 years. Governance and structure must take into  
101 account the many changes that have occurred since Mennonites arrived in North America and  
102 evaluate the challenges and opportunities of the day. Vision 2010 seeks to address these issues  
103 and brings an altered sense of mission, vision, and purpose to the congregations of Lancaster  
104 Mennonite Conference. A fresh attempt to capture a missional future compels the call for  
105 structures that enable and promote the vision of “new, revitalized, and multiplying  
106 congregations.”

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### 110 **1. Historical Background of a Missional Identity Lost and Regained**

111 “Conference” (*Zusammenkunft*) and “Bishop” may be the oldest local symbols of authority in  
112 the Lancaster Mennonite community. These early structures provoke a wide range of emotions  
113 and responses because of their formative, authoritative, and long-lived influence. This governing  
114 body needs to be explored, explained, and connected to past, present, and future if it is to remain  
115 a viable structure for leadership, authority, and oversight. To remain viable, however, likely  
116 means change. How might Bishop Board adjust or remake itself now in the light of its history  
117 and in the promise of a missional future in Vision 2010 and beyond?

118  
119 John L. Ruth, in *The Earth is the Lord’s*, provides numerous windows into the Lancaster  
120 Mennonite understanding of authority and the connectedness structures of the Conference. He  
121 illustrates the authoritative and far-reaching influence of “a conference (*Zusammenkunft*) of  
122 congregational leaders” when they confronted Martin Mylin about the new, flashy home he built  
123 in 1742 and his immediate deference to the group consensus.<sup>2</sup> Almost a hundred years later,  
124 Ruth, from the perspective of Deacon Martin Mellinger will describe how the “conference  
125 (*Zusammenkunft*) of congregational leaders” operated.

126

127 As to how the twice-yearly Lancaster Mennonite Conference (*Zusammenkunft*) was  
128 understood by the participants, we have Deacon Mellinger’s own words of 1825: “There  
129 our brethren earnestly present to the assembled gathering the commands and prohibitions of  
130 the Savior and Apostles, namely that whosoever is the friend of the world is the enemy of  
131 God.”<sup>3</sup>

132

133 This “conference,” however, was not a static structure over the centuries. Ruth documents  
134 change and development of “a conference (*Zusammenkunft*) of congregational leaders” to a more  
135 formal “Bishop Board” in later years. He writes,

136

137 In the twentieth century, those in this role came to use the terms “Bishop Board” and even  
138 “Executive Board,” having less brotherly connotations; the other ordained men were  
139 expected obediently to ratify the board’s directives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John L. Ruth, *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001, 257.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth, 465.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth, 256.

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141 One can discern at least three periods of Anabaptist-Mennonite history and related changes in  
142 identity, leadership, and authority. The first hundred years of the Anabaptist Movement, the first  
143 period, took place with an identity centered in mission and in being sent to Europe by God to  
144 proclaim a recovered and neglected Gospel to a people who had lost their way. Extra-local polity  
145 was minimal. The individual and congregational understanding of sentness was high. The second  
146 period, significantly influenced by persecution pressure, generated a retreat from an aggressive  
147 effort of evangelism and church reform. Consolidation of a new church and the formation of an  
148 Anabaptist identity as a contrast to the prevailing Protestant and Catholic ethos began a process  
149 of internalization and separation from the world in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that eventually brought  
150 mission to an end. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, various Anabaptist and Mennonite groups began to  
151 recover the sense of being sent into the world with a message of reconciliation by God. Much of  
152 the impetus for this renewed sense of mission came from Protestant influence (revivalism,  
153 mission society movement) rather than Mennonite historical roots, however. For Lancaster  
154 Conference, this recovery of a missional Anabaptist identity began as the 19<sup>th</sup> century closes.  
155 This renewed sense of being sent by God into the world occurred from within the context of the  
156 growth of hierarchy and the continued emergence of more structure and organization.

157

158 Hubert Brown, author of *Black and Mennonite*, observes with a sense of sadness, the loss of a  
159 missional identity after the first century of the Anabaptist movement, but he is not sure why this  
160 loss occurred. He writes:

161

162 From Anabaptism to Mennonitism we seem to have lost a ministry and I'm not at all sure  
163 why. I sometimes wonder why Mennonites, with their strange and peculiar history of  
164 dynamic missionary activity, have such a small number of followers in the world today.<sup>5</sup>

165

166 John H. Yoder, who saw the same loss as Brown, suggests that the early missional identity of the  
167 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists was submerged by harsh persecution and by a failure to fully divest  
168 itself of Christendom trappings. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, group survival replaced church  
169 reform and mission.<sup>6</sup> An inward focused, ingrown identity drawn from a biblical and community  
170 core value of separation combined with another core value of yielding to the consensus, ended  
171 mission for almost 200 years.

172

173 After persecution, migration, and resettlement, a paradigm shift back towards a missional  
174 Anabaptist identity and a missional authority began. In Lancaster Conference, this recovery of a  
175 missional identity did not begin until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, somewhat later than other  
176 Mennonite groups. A "paradigm shift" is the best term to describe this process. Thomas Kuhn  
177 first used the term "paradigm shift" in his landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*  
178 (1962) to describe the process and result of a change in basic assumptions within a ruling theory  
179 of science. Numerous disciplines have since applied the term "paradigm shift" to other human  
180 experience to explain how change occurs. When paradigms change, the process involves the  
181 introduction of a new system of reality that enters into competition with the existing system. For  
182 a period of time, the two (or three or four) competing systems function simultaneously, each  
183 vying for control of how reality is perceived. The period of changeover from one system to  
184 another is generally conflictual and extended.

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<sup>5</sup> Hubert Brown, *Black & Mennonite*, Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976, 90.

<sup>6</sup> John H. Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in E.J. Klassen, ed. *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970, 4-6.

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The reigning traditional understanding of Lancaster Conference identity and authority was centered in separation, humility, and *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness). This understanding, which came with the community to the New World in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, was challenged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by young leaders who stood outside the traditional authority structures. These young leaders, typically not ordained, led from outside the established structures of the bench (Bishop and ordained congregational leaders). As institutions grew and matured, new centers of authority emerged in competition with the traditional authority of the bench. Leadership and authority was centered in the Great Commission, a call to service, and an activism that led church members to embrace a previously unheard of level of diversity. By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, traditional authority was reduced to the less attractive of two possible approaches by a majority of the Conference. However, both structures, the old and the new, existed (and still do) side by side.

Ruth illustrates the paradigm change with the development of a missional consciousness that arose outside of the formal leadership and authority structures in 1895. Ruth tells the story of John H. Mellinger and John R. Buckwalter who led the Conference into missions activity.<sup>7</sup> The original impetus came in 1895 with the formation of the Home Missions Advocates by unordained men as an organizational structure to focus, lead, and guide new missions activity. In response, “the bishops called for the group to disband.”<sup>8</sup> In what Ruth calls “remarkable parliamentary resistance to the bishop ruling,” the group carefully and humbly maneuvered past bishop disapproval by obediently disbanding the group, and then simply reforming it with the same vision but a different name. Ruth writes, “By taking up the name Mennonite Sunday School Mission, the reshuffled youthful enthusiasts identified themselves with work that had been allowed by Lancaster Conference since 1871.”

This successful “parliamentary” maneuvering signaled the beginning of significant change in Lancaster Mennonite Conference. This reemergence of a much older but long forgotten missional Anabaptist identity began to compete with the monolithic Lancaster Mennonite identity that called for separation, uniformity, and submission. Ruth interprets the development in the following way:

Now within the conference itself there would be a double track of identities: traditional *humility* and new *activity*. There was, of course, a tension between the bishops’ authority in their traditional role of keeping house and the informal authority of lay members as they held up models of activity from other denominations.

By the middle of the following century, the newer authority would pull even with the older authority, and in another decade pass it.<sup>9</sup>

The existence of two competing authority paradigms generated both positive and negative results as the century progressed. Negatively, considerable conflict and a lot of personal and community pain occurred. Positively, significant numeric growth occurred along with an increase in the number of LMC congregations and members, domestic and foreign. John Ruth argues that the traditional authority tried to maintain a common core of identity by enforcing uniform standards of dress and behavior such as excluding certain entertainment activities. This approach was in tension with the new activity of new institutions like mission boards, schools, relief agencies,

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth, 715-721.  
<sup>8</sup> Ruth, 718.  
<sup>9</sup> Ruth, 721, italics his.

233 and alternative service organizations with their personnel and constituencies. But even traditional  
234 authority can recognize benefit in the new. Eventually, Ruth says, “Missions was offered as a  
235 keynote of identity for Lancaster Mennonitism.”<sup>10</sup> Eastern Mennonite Mission is one of the  
236 current institutional expressions of the early beginnings of this paradigm change.

237  
238 Ruth illustrates the pain associated with the paradigm shift in his description of the conflict that  
239 occurred between missionaries and bishops.

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241 The freedom [Elam Stauffer] and the other missionaries were now claiming would in the  
242 perspective of years seem much in line with what the main body of the Lancaster  
243 Conference would eventually endorse. This process would involve a severe inner struggle  
244 and a resistance from members with a strong conscience against the loosening of traditional  
245 authority patterns.<sup>11</sup>

246  
247 According to Ruth’s analysis, mission work received its final push to acceptance by “traditional  
248 *humility*” when it was viewed “as a way to work separately from more liberal Mennonites” that  
249 were influencing the Lancaster community toward “new *activity*” and a “newer authority.”<sup>12</sup> As  
250 traditional authority saw ways to understand new activity as being consistent with its traditional  
251 goals and values, consensus between the two competing paradigms occurred and generated  
252 mutual forward movement.

253  
254 Ruth summarizes his 1213 page tome in a single sentence. “Simply put, the long story of this  
255 book is about a spiritual family striving to persist and to extend itself.”<sup>13</sup> Persistence is about  
256 survival of the group with a distinct, cohesive identity. Extension refers to growth, which is  
257 another way to describe mission. Missions, service and development work, alternative service  
258 programs, education, and Mennonite institutions like Mennonite Central Committee, colleges,  
259 seminaries, and universities all promoted a newer missional Anabaptist identity centered around  
260 new activity that quickly took the shape of new institutions rather than around a traditional  
261 particular, uniform, community lifestyle pattern. According to John Howard Yoder, however, the  
262 use of “new activity” as a locus of identity and authority quickly resulted in multiple identities  
263 and authorities as the various new institutions presented their revised view of reality and  
264 gathered constituencies who resonated with the institution. A new authority structure centered in  
265 new activity, eventually fragmented Conference identity by creating multiple authority centers  
266 and a plurality of views on how new activity might be expressed best.<sup>14</sup>

267  
268 *The Earth Is the Lord’s* provides several examples. The first example comes from the Lancaster  
269 Conference mission enterprise in Africa. The missionaries came into close contact with the tribal  
270 religions of the African people. Ruth describes one poignant encounter when the missionaries  
271 removed numerous iron rings encircling the legs and piercing the ears of a new female convert.  
272 Ruth observes, “Little did the watching missionaries realize, as they sought to detach their  
273 African converts from layers of their folk customs, that they themselves were about to enter upon  
274 decades of shedding many customs of their own.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ruth, 1007.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth, 1007.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth, 919.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth, 839.

<sup>14</sup> Yoder, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth, 933.

275  
276 Workers in home and foreign missions “felt that the more they tried to bring in new people, the  
277 more the stern code of Lancaster Conference rules on such matters as costume or insurance got  
278 in their way.”<sup>16</sup> The missionaries struggled to communicate their concerns with leadership back  
279 home and Conference leadership struggled to understand the missionaries’ concern with the  
280 *Rules and Discipline*. Ruth, in the context of the East African Revival, makes the following  
281 observation: “the more the missionaries spoke of yieldedness and dying to self, the more they  
282 stood up against the authority of their bishops back home.”<sup>17</sup> R. J. Shenk, a leader who struggled  
283 and failed to understand the tension between the old and new authorities, described this time as  
284 “A Present-day Conundrum.”<sup>18</sup> Shenk, with his use of the word “conundrum,” suggested that  
285 two mutually exclusive things were being brought together. He expressed his inability to  
286 understand the paradox when he wrote, “It would not seem to me to require an unusually brilliant  
287 mind to understand that one who disobeys the church disobeys God.” One must certainly temper  
288 Shenk’s observation with the experience of the early Anabaptist disobedience toward the Roman  
289 Catholic Church and church authority. When Claesken Galedochter, an early Anabaptist martyr,  
290 was interrogated for her rejection of the mass, infant baptism, and priestly authority, her  
291 inquisitor said to her, “You should think: Do I know better than the holy fathers fifteen hundred  
292 years ago? You should think that you are simple.”<sup>19</sup>

293  
294 A second example comes from the Civilian Public Service initiative. Lancaster Conference  
295 traditional authority agreed to organize its own CPS program in order “to prevent the exposure of  
296 their ‘boys’ to nonMennonite influence” and to prevent contact with “more liberal Mennonite  
297 Conferences.”<sup>20</sup> Cooperation between new activity and traditional authority again emerged when  
298 the new activity could be framed in ways consistent with traditional goals and values. CPS  
299 protected separation.

300  
301 The point of these examples is to illustrate the tension that surfaced between traditional authority  
302 and a new, missional authority and the ways that cooperation between the two was typically  
303 forged. When common ground and a rationale for cooperation could not be found, then division  
304 soon followed. The turmoil in the wake of a lost but re-emerging missional authority eventually  
305 brought an end to the practice of publishing and enforcing a common visible uniformity with the  
306 *Rules and Discipline* and generated a split. This same mechanism of division followed the  
307 innovation of Sunday school and the introduction of the English language into church life. The  
308 paradigm shift in Lancaster Conference that began as the 19<sup>th</sup> century closed brought two  
309 identities and authorities into competition. Shortly after mid-century the traditional authority had  
310 lost the advantage and a new identity and authority was in the ascendancy. However, both  
311 continued and continue to exist side by side.

312  
313 The Conference, during the administration of Ervin Stutzman, reached a “point of no return” for  
314 traditional authority. The 1990s issue of “women in ministry” and “denominational merger”  
315 served as a watershed between traditional authority and new activity. If a missional Anabaptist  
316 identity is the future for Lancaster Conference, then whether or not LMC can stay together will

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<sup>16</sup> Ruth, 958.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth, 1005. See also Richard K. MacMaster with Donald R. Jacobs, *A Gentle Wind of God. The Influence of the East Africa Revival*, Herald Press, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> R. J. Shenk, “A Present-day Conundrum.” *Pastoral Messenger*, July 1952.

<sup>19</sup> *Martyrs Mirror*, 612-16.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth, 984-85.

317 depend on finding sufficient points of connection between those holding to traditional authority,  
318 those committed to new activity and institutions, and those advocating a missional authority. It is  
319 an open question as to whether or not sufficient common ground can be found to provide a core  
320 of identity to stay together and to work for a common vision.

321  
322 Conrad Kanagy postulates the presence of yet a third paradigm. He wonders if “individual  
323 members moved away from granting authority to bishops and institutions while simultaneously  
324 becoming more congregationally oriented. The increase in individualism among Mennonites as  
325 we became more assimilated and acculturated has made the authority of both (bishops and  
326 institutions) less important than that which is grounded in their local congregations. At the same  
327 time, however, individualism has caught up with congregations so that pastors too feel a loss of  
328 authority.”<sup>21</sup>

329  
330 Kanagy’s point is well taken. Kuhn observed that when a long-standing paradigm is challenged,  
331 typically more than two paradigms are in competition. Donald Kraybill noted recently that  
332 individualism has profoundly altered Mennonite faith and practice in ways that still remain  
333 untouched in the Old Order groups.<sup>22</sup> A large portion of the above argument for a new authority  
334 centered in institution is drawn from the work of John Ruth whose Conference history ended  
335 with the events of 1977. Likewise, Yoder’s observations stem from the same time period.

336  
337 Kauffman and Harder, in their 1989 church survey, provided the first quantitative information on  
338 the shift away from communalism and toward individualism and congregationalism.<sup>23</sup> Data on  
339 communalism and individualism was not available in the prior church study in 1972, therefore,  
340 trend observation could not be made. Kanagy’s new church study data will allow for trend  
341 observations. Many Mennonite institutions struggle to maintain their ability to retain a  
342 Mennonite constituency and donor base. One solution Mennonite institutions like colleges and  
343 primary schools have taken is to attract nonMennonite-nonAnabaptist customers. The same  
344 process occurred at the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society after about 1980. Funding  
345 patterns have moved from an institutional pattern of funding (congregations to Conference to  
346 organization) to a congregational pattern of funding (congregations directly to organization) to  
347 an individual pattern of funding (organizational solicitation directly to the individual). An  
348 individualistic paradigm does explain some of contemporary Mennonite behavior and the  
349 institutional response to it.

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351 If Kanagy is right about a massive turn to individualism and congregationalism as the primary  
352 paradigm for understanding authority in the LMC system, then this contemporary feature of  
353 LMC life must be accounted for in any changes made to governance and structure. Knowing  
354 which reality to deal with in any structure and governance planning seems crucial. If “traditional  
355 authority” and “new activity” are irrelevant, and individualism and congregationalism represent a  
356 still newer reality, they must be taken into account. The old military saying, “we don’t want to  
357 discover too late that we prepared ourselves to fight the previous war” becomes especially  
358 poignant. This statement is often connected to the French “Maginot Line,” which was designed  
359 after the trench warfare of WWI, and its total ineffectiveness against Hitler’s new Blitzkrieg,  
360 lightning-style warfare in WWII. Restructuring for an institutional pluralism that is already  
361 irrelevant would follow that French line of thought.

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<sup>21</sup> Conrad Kanagy, email to Brinton Rutherford, May 2, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Kraybill, interview with Karl Landis and Brinton Rutherford, April 3, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedgerr, *The Mennonite Mosaic*, Herald Press, 1991, 86-101.

362  
363 As Lancaster Mennonite Conference enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vision 2010 must seek to continue  
364 and perhaps even accelerate the changeover from a traditional authority of an enforced visible  
365 conformity to a missional authority and a missional Anabaptist identity that has plural centers.  
366 The last series of Conference issues, until the failed ordination of women vote, had all been  
367 decided in favor of continued and growing congregational autonomy and Conference diversity.  
368 Vision 2010 serves as a rallying point for Lancaster Mennonite Conference as it seeks to become  
369 a fellowship of missional congregations: congregations sent into the world by a missionary God  
370 but connected to one another by a common core and common mission. Initiatives in church  
371 planting, church revitalization and thriving congregations with strategies of leadership  
372 development, identity formation, structure and governance reform, spiritual vitality,  
373 communication, and networking with other related groups strive to implement this missional  
374 vision. Several questions are appropriate:  
375

- 376 • Can a new structure be framed in such a way as to find sufficient convergence with  
377 the various authority paradigms in the Conference?
- 378 • Is the current Bishop Board structure representative of traditional authority, the new  
379 authority/identity/activity, or congregationalism/individualism?
- 380 • Can current structures be identified with the paradigm to which they connect?
- 381 • How do bishops on Bishop Board function in relation to traditional authority, the  
382 new authority/identity/activity, and individualism?
- 383 • How does EMM fit into the authority paradigm change within LMC?
- 384 • What governance structure best serves a missional Anabaptist identity?
- 385 • How can any changes to structure provide the needed convergence between the  
386 various paradigms in order stay together and to work together?
- 387 • How can missional structure properly include plural, diverse centers?  
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389 Lancaster Mennonite Conference describes itself as follows: “As a fellowship of congregations,  
390 Lancaster Mennonite Conference is moving toward a vision that calls and sends us as  
391 participants in God’s mission of love and reconciliation at home, across the street, and around  
392 the world.” How might the Board of Bishops best structure itself to function as part of a  
393 missional Lancaster Mennonite Conference. What might missional authority in a 21<sup>st</sup> century  
394 context look like? These are the questions to which we turn next.  
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## 398 2. Historical Background of “bishop” and “conference” in LMC 399

400 “Bishop” is the term used to describe an office within the Christian church. Within the  
401 Mennonite tradition, bishop is the “highest ministerial office.” The *Mennonite Encyclopedia*  
402 provides two major articles on “bishop” and “elder” that provides extensive historical detail on  
403 the use and development of these terms in Anabaptist and Mennonite circles. These articles are  
404 worth reading for their historical background information.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bender, Harold S. and Leonard Gross. “Bishop.” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989.  
Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Retrieved 9 March 2007  
<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/b542me.html>. Krahn, Cornelius and John J. Friesen. "Elder

405  
406 Lancaster Mennonite Conference of MCUSA continues to use the office of bishop as the highest  
407 ministerial office. According to Dale Stoltzfus, Lancaster Conference is the only remaining  
408 MCUSA conference that has continuously used the office of bishop. Most MCUSA conferences  
409 have shifted from the office of bishop to an overseer or conference minister model. A few  
410 conferences have some individual overseers who continue to use or have switched back to the  
411 term “bishop.” Virginia Conference and Franconia Conference have examples of this. Pacific  
412 Northwest Conference has deliberately returned to the office of bishop from conference minister.  
413 African-Americans generally find the term “overseer” offensive.

414  
415 The term “bishop” has very early usage in the Lancaster Mennonite settlement. Benedict  
416 Brechbuhl, Swiss Anabaptist bishop already in 1689, arrived in Pennsylvania in 1717 as a  
417 bishop. Christian Herr, son of Hans Herr, led the settlement and functioned as bishop by 1725  
418 according to John L. Ruth’s history of Lancaster Conference. Another Christian Herr, bishop in  
419 1840, wrote about a threefold ministry pattern of “bishops, elders or ministers, and deacons” in  
420 use in the Lancaster community that was likely the same pattern used in Europe before  
421 immigration began.<sup>25</sup> “Conference” was originally the annual gathering of bishops. In a sense  
422 “conference” and “bishops” are synonymous terms until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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424 Although this threefold pattern of bishop, minister, and deacon is ancient, the *Didache*, an early  
425 Christian second century document, only identified bishops and deacons as the primary church  
426 offices. Some scholars conclude a threefold pattern can be seen in Titus, although dating for the  
427 writing of Titus spans a large time period and could easily be very late first century. While the  
428 specifics of the biblical content and context can be debated,

429  
430 “most Christian scholars ... agree that the threefold structure of ministry, with one bishop  
431 along with a number of presbyters and deacons in each local church, does not appear in the  
432 New Testament. There is broad consensus among scholars that the historical episcopate  
433 developed in the post-New Testament period, from the local leadership of a college of  
434 presbyters, who were sometimes called *episkopoi*, to the leadership of a single bishop.”<sup>26</sup>

435  
436 The primary argument among scholars of various traditions is not whether or not the “historical  
437 episcopate” developed from a plural leadership evident in the New Testament record to a  
438 hierarchical episcopacy sometime after the first century. As noted by the quote above, that is a  
439 largely settled issue. It did develop over time. Rather, the argument is whether or not such  
440 structure developed as a “purely human, historical development or of divine institution.” If the  
441 former view is accepted, then diversity in polity is acceptable. This conclusion is a Protestant  
442 position and represents a “low polity” view. On the other hand, if “divine institution” is accepted,  
443 then church polity is ordained by God to have a particular structure that is connected to an  
444 apostolic succession that must be carefully guarded if authoritative teaching is to be preserved  
445 through the bishop as the successor to the apostles. This “high polity” perspective is the position  
446 of Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican/Episcopal traditions. Anabaptists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century reacted  
447 against the high polity of the Roman Catholic Church. Succeeding generations of Mennonites  
448 and other believers church traditions have consistently held to a “low polity” position.

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(Ältester)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. Retrieved 9 March 2007 <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/E513ME.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ruth, 161, 198-99, 1170-1; “Bishop.” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*.

<sup>26</sup> Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, New York: Newman Press, 2001, 217.

449  
450 If this analysis has any merit, then Lancaster Mennonite Conference can conceivably modify its  
451 polity in ways that will not breach faithfulness to Scripture. The believers church view has long  
452 held that polity is not specifically mandated by Scripture.

453  
454 Lancaster Conference polity has made major structural shifts over the centuries. The movement  
455 from “conference” as an annual gathering of bishops to an institutional structure that eventually  
456 has paid staff and formal office space in addition to bishops began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The  
457 movement from traditional authority to a new activity based in institution influences the  
458 development of “conference” from a traditional, communal body of relationships to “conference”  
459 understood as an institution.<sup>27</sup> One of the early products of this institution was the Rules &  
460 Discipline, first published in 1881. The organization of broader church program boards in which  
461 LMC participated, began with the organization of a Publication board in 1875, a Missions board  
462 in 1882, and an Education board in 1895. The Mennonite Church as a denomination formally  
463 took shape in 1898. In 1971 the Mennonite Mutual Aid and Congregational Ministries boards  
464 were added along with a denominational restructuring of the (Old) Mennonite Church at that  
465 time.<sup>28</sup>

466  
467 As it relates to church polity, Cornelius Dyck observes, “The Mennonite church, therefore, has a  
468 form of government...[that] is neither purely episcopal, synodal, nor congregational, but a  
469 combination of all three.” He further observes that denominational authority has waned and  
470 “Authority has shifted in the direction of the congregation and district conferences.”<sup>29</sup> His  
471 statement appears applicable to Lancaster Mennonite Conference as well.

472  
473  
474 **Office of Oversight:** Dale Stoltzfus, in a paper prepared for the Dallas Conference Minister’s  
475 Meeting in 2004 (Appendix 3), reviews the diversity of polity historically across The Mennonite  
476 Church and The General Conference Mennonite Church and currently across the merged  
477 MCUSA. His description of Mennonite diversity suggests that Anabaptist-Mennonites also hold  
478 a low polity view. He provides helpful suggestions for understanding the function of deacon,  
479 pastor, and an Office of Oversight, whatever that office might be named. He cautions against any  
480 hasty dismembering of existing authority structures.

481  
482 In his reflections on that paper (Appendix 1) he says, “The writings in the Polity book attempt to  
483 restore some redefinition to the office of bishop, restore authority to care for the total system,  
484 especially in areas of core values and faith and life issues.”<sup>30</sup> The listening committee at the 2004  
485 Dallas conference (Appendix 2) indicated a consensus for an office of oversight, regardless of  
486 the name. Furthermore, that group noted the fact of the loss of oversight in the Mennonite  
487 Church broadly and called for restoration of that office.

488  
489       There seemed to be a consensus among us that caring for the spiritual health of the body is  
490       a vitally important task. Quoting from Dale’s paper: we need to “mind the faith, keep core  
491       values focused, provide spiritual care, assist congregations in spiritual discernment on

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<sup>27</sup> Steven M. Nolt, “From Bishops to Bureaucracy: Observations on the Migration of Authority,” *Vision*, Fall 2004, 14-24.

<sup>28</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993, 214-235.

<sup>29</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, 220.

<sup>30</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Reflections on the December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper,” March 2007, 1.

492 theological issues and represent the conference.” While what we call this task needs more  
493 discussion and discernment, we acknowledge that it has been removed or diminished in our  
494 conferences and needs restoration. Conference ministers should be included.<sup>31</sup>  
495

496 Any discussion of leadership structure and the accompanying activity of oversight leads  
497 immediately to the question of leadership and authority. Ultimate authority resides in and comes  
498 from God. As Creator and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, God is sovereign. Does God’s  
499 authority come to humanity and, if so, how does it come? If God gives authority to humans and  
500 humans have God’s authority, how then should that authority function? In the context of this  
501 essay, how does authority function in the church, and more specifically in a missional church,  
502 and even yet more specifically in the fellowship of churches called Lancaster Mennonite  
503 Conference of MCUSA who seek to be missional? How should bishops lead?  
504  
505

506 **Authority, Power, and Leadership:** Authority, power, and leadership are three interrelated  
507 concepts. According to John Esau, “authority is the right to exercise power over others.”  
508 Authority resides in offices. “Power,” Esau says, “is the ability to get things done.”<sup>32</sup> A leader,  
509 by virtue of office or by virtue of expertise or both has authority and gets things done (wields  
510 power). A person may be given an office with authority and then get things done with the  
511 authority conferred. This is a traditional form of authority, power, and leadership. On the other  
512 hand, an individual may get things done, perhaps because of particular expertise, and as a result  
513 have his or her implicit, informal authority explicitly identified, which may or may not result in  
514 the conferring of an office (formal authority). At the same time, a person may have an office  
515 with authority but fail to get things done (no power) and thus lead ineffectively. Ineffective  
516 leadership fails to get things done or does unimportant, useless or wrong things. This resulting  
517 lack of power in legitimate leadership and/or office is an abuse of authority and a reflection of  
518 poor leadership.  
519

520 As John Ruth has suggested, “authority is conferred or acknowledged on the basis of trust, as  
521 well as the conferring of office. Some leaders “demand” the authority that is supposed to inhere  
522 in their position, without first winning the trust of their flock. That, as Paul himself knew,  
523 doesn’t work in the Kingdom of God. Others leaders actually, often humbly, “command” a  
524 following. How can they do this? They feel the mandate from those who have conferred the role.  
525 Part of the efficacy of such a leader’ functioning is that the group they are leading has given it to  
526 them not only in name, but out of their recognition that by method, temperament, example and  
527 commitment to the group’s spiritual memory he/she embodies the fundamental motifs of their  
528 fellowship. This may seem idealistic; indeed it only works when (1) the group puts their most  
529 qualified (spiritually valued) persons in leadership and (2) the group is in good spiritual health,  
530 which includes a respect for the shepherding role to which a bishop is called in the service of the  
531 Great Shepherd of the Sheep.”<sup>33</sup>  
532

533 The 1895 Bishop Board had the authority and the power to disband the Home Mission  
534 Advocates, which they did. John Mellinger and John Buckwalter, who had no formal authority to  
535 begin home missions, had the power to do so and they did it. They led a process that brought into

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<sup>31</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Review and Projections Related to the Oversight Ministry of Conference Ministers,” Dallas, TX, December 2004, 5.

<sup>32</sup> John Esau, Handout Sheets provided by Paul Zehr.

<sup>33</sup> John Ruth, email to Brinton Rutherford, January 4, 2008.

536 existence the Mennonite Sunday School Mission that did home missions and eventually became  
537 what is today Eastern Mennonite Missions. Over time, authority of office was conferred that  
538 recognized the power they had (they got important things done) and the leadership that they  
539 wielded as offices within the institutional structure emerged. These two men were willing to lead  
540 (i.e., wield power in a direction that time has clearly shown to have been needed, proper, and  
541 effective). Eventually the “new authority” that was initially located outside of the “traditional  
542 authority” of the Bishop Board, was formally placed within the recognized offices of an  
543 institutional structure that became accountable to the Bishop Board. The Bishop Board itself  
544 begins to take on an institutional character as it regulates and oversees other institutions, many of  
545 which are far larger than the Bishop Board itself.<sup>34</sup>  
546

547 The influence of “new authority” that begins to emerge from the various “new institutions” as  
548 the twentieth century moves forward also impacts congregational life. The professionalism of the  
549 pastorate that takes place through from the twentieth century onward stems in large part from the  
550 new educational institutions, especially the emerging seminaries. The growing educational level  
551 of congregational members begins to demand a more sophisticated clergy. As the education level  
552 of new pastors begins to exceed that of older pastors and bishops, an educated laity and clergy  
553 places greater emphasis on local congregational autonomy from traditional authority.  
554 Congregational budgets grow to support a greater level of support to an ever larger pastoral staff.  
555 The traditional congregational structure of lay leadership and unsupported pastoral leadership  
556 begins to take an institutional turn in response to the “new authority” and “new activity” from a  
557 host of new institutions.<sup>35</sup> Thus congregations also take an institutional turn that moves in an  
558 individualistic and congregational direction.  
559

560  
561 **Missional Authority:** The foundational book from the Gospel and Our Culture Network,  
562 *Missional Church*, describes two realms of structure, the “particular” (congregational) and the  
563 “connected” (district, conference, denomination), in which church authority must function.  
564 Chapter 9 deals specifically with structures of connectedness, or supra-congregational structures.  
565 Stoltzfus picks up this same sense of particular and connected in his “Reflections on the  
566 December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper.” He says:  
567

568 Our Mennonite polity states that both Conference and congregations must be taken  
569 seriously and healthy Mennonite community includes both. The issue is—what is the  
570 balance between the two. A key question that must be answered is what is the role of the  
571 bishop in having a congregation work within a framework that allows for independence as  
572 well as interdependence.<sup>36</sup>  
573

574 Here Stoltzfus suggests that the understanding of the role of the bishop must shift in order to  
575 embrace both the “particular” and the “connected.” He indicates that such a shift will include  
576 three tensions:<sup>37</sup>  
577

- 578 1. congregationalism to being part of conference
- 579 2. personal as ending place to gathered community
- 580 3. the personal to the whole

---

<sup>34</sup> See Nolt, “From Bishops to Bureaucracy,” 17-19.

<sup>35</sup> Kauffman and Driedger, *Mosaic*, 125-146.

<sup>36</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Reflections on the December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper,” March 2007, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Reflections on the December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper,” March 2007, 1.

581  
582 The concluding paragraph of *Missional Church* suggests that structure and authority in a  
583 missional setting may look and function differently than either the traditional or the new  
584 authority structures:

585  
586 In particular, a Missional ecclesiology for North America will resist all attempts at  
587 uniformity of structure in favor of a Missional unity in diversity. It will renounce the power  
588 games of democratic and representative polities in favor of creative new forms of  
589 collegiality and consensus formation. The “strong in faith,” will be required in a missional  
590 ecclesiology to shape their desires and actions around the needs of the “weak in faith”  
591 (Rom. 14), as a testimony to the transformed understanding of power that we are learning  
592 from Jesus.<sup>38</sup>

593  
594 The quote above is quite provocative and resonates with Anabaptist themes of discernment,  
595 separation, consensus, and humility. Missional unity is presented as something irreconcilably  
596 different from “uniformity of structure. How does a missional authority practically structure  
597 itself in light of a paradigm shift from “traditional authority” to “new activity” centered in  
598 mission with significant movement toward individualism and congregationalism?

599  
600 Guder et al. do not provide any further elaboration of the specific outlines of a missional  
601 authority, however, Lois Barrett in “Polities that Unite and Divide: Magnets and Fences” does go  
602 into detail. She notes that while “All polities affect who is in (united) and who is out (divided),”  
603 fences “are not sufficient to define the center of the church.”<sup>39</sup> While structures may do a good  
604 job a creating and maintaining boundaries, boundaries do not define the center. In other words, a  
605 fence can easily go around the wrong center. “So a good church polity,” she continues, “will not  
606 simply judge whether people are inside or outside the fence,” but will also “attempt to discern  
607 whether people are moving toward the center, whether they are being drawn to Jesus.”<sup>40</sup>

608  
609 In addition to good fences and strong magnets, Barrett offers three guidelines for the  
610 organizational culture of a missional Anabaptist polity. First polity needs effective tools of  
611 “discernment” that keep fences around the proper center and allows a determination of the  
612 direction of movement in relation to the center. Second, polity must have structures that insist  
613 upon “agreeing and disagreeing in love.” Third, polity needs to have structures that propagate a  
614 “humility about being right.” From Barrett’s perspective, then, a good polity must be able to  
615 determine both location and direction of individuals and congregations in relation to the center.<sup>41</sup>

616  
617 Lois Barrett and Jeff vanKooten, in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, provide further expansion on  
618 missional authority. They indicate from their reading of the New Testament that “Jesus’  
619 authority comes from God, and the church’s authority comes from Jesus...but Jesus’ authority is  
620 not like the authority of those in charge of the institutions of the dominant culture.”<sup>42</sup> VanKooten  
621 and Barrett describe three loci of authority suggested by Lesslie Newbigin:

---

<sup>38</sup> Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 268.

<sup>39</sup> Barrett, “Polities that Unite and Divide: Magnets and Fences,” in *Without Spot or Wrinkle: Reflecting Theologically on the Nature of the Church*, Koop and Schertz, eds., Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000, 112, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Barrett, “Polities that Unite and Divide,” 115.

<sup>41</sup> Barrett, “Polities that Unite and Divide,” 116-119.

<sup>42</sup> Barrett et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 141.

622  
623 “A living community, a tradition of teaching, and the continuing work of the divine Spirit  
624 illuminating the tradition in each new generation and situation, so that it becomes the living  
625 speech of God for that time, place, and culture.”<sup>43</sup>  
626

627 These three loci—community, a tradition of teaching, and the work of the Spirit—have some  
628 strong connections to the rigorous and persuasive theological work that James McClendon has  
629 done on authority if “a tradition of teaching” includes Scripture as part of the tradition that is  
630 taught.  
631

632  
633 **Authority:** James McClendon, author of a three-volume Anabaptist systematic theology, uses the  
634 term “authority” to describe “a name for the Godhood of God.”<sup>44</sup> The need for authority is  
635 necessary in human endeavor. The very existence of the term “anarchy,” which is defined as the  
636 absence of any authority and generally describes an unhealthy, disintegrating system, indicates  
637 the necessity for authority of some kind. The constant struggle of those who lead throughout  
638 time, inside and outside the church, has been to maintain authority and avoid the abuse of power  
639 associated with authority. Two primary views have been used in government: 1) coercive power  
640 of a sovereign (might makes right) with total and unlimited authority over others. 2) plural,  
641 shared power that is representative. The latter, at its best, hinges upon the self-government of the  
642 individual who renders personal consent to be governed to some formal political structure.  
643

644 McClendon, like Guder, VanKooten, and Barrett, suggests authority in the Kingdom of God  
645 must be different than the authority structures of the world. He explains authority within the  
646 church by describing three kinds of authority: *authority in*, *authority on*, and *criteria authority*.  
647

648 *Authority in* is that authority inherent in an office or position. *Authority on* is the authority that an  
649 expert has on a topic or subject. *Criteria authority* is the authority one has simply by nature of  
650 being. McClendon uses the example of a native Russian speaker who has the authority to correct  
651 the speech of a nonnative speaker simply by virtue of being a native speaker. This is neither the  
652 authority of an office nor an expert grammarian, but the authority of being a native Russian  
653 speaker.  
654

655 He further distinguishes between divine authority (“a name for the Godhood of God”) and what  
656 he calls human proximate authority. Proximate authority is not total and perfect authority like  
657 God has, but is some approximation of that authority that humans can have.  
658

659 McClendon describes human proximate authority with a three-fold, Trinitarian framework.  
660 VanKooten and Barrett potentially mesh with McClendon here. McClendon presents a unitive  
661 authority that occurs in the church community through fellowship (*koinonia*) and includes the  
662 activity of the Holy Spirit in community (*criteria authority*, the authority of being Christian,  
663 being church). This point connects to Newbigin’s first and third points. McClendon also  
664 develops a redemptive authority connected to the person and work of Christ in divine grace and  
665 has its primary locus in Scripture (*authority on*). The canon of Scripture is authoritative in its  
666 presentation of God in Christ. This point connects to Newbigin’s second point. McClendon adds,

---

<sup>43</sup> Barrett et al, *Treasure in Clay Jars*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> McClendon, James, *Doctrine: A Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 456.

667 however, an interactive authority connected to God’s creative and sustaining work in the world  
668 and human interaction with that creation through experience (*authority in*). Each loci connects to  
669 a person of the trinity, divine attributes, and a entry point for human participation (experience,  
670 Scripture, community). Any Christian authority structure needs all three of these pieces: unitive,  
671 redemptive, and interactive. Perhaps these concepts may help evaluate proposed structures at  
672 some point in the future.

673  
674 Stoltzfus also speaks to this issue of authority in his “Reflections.” He says Mennonite authority  
675 is corporate:

676  
677 Mennonites have affirmed that the authority of the church is primarily corporate rather than  
678 individualistic. Some current practices (and teachings) from some Mennonite leaders  
679 affirms an understanding of “apostolic leadership” which can tend to replace the bishop  
680 discernment model and corporate discernment.<sup>45</sup>

681  
682 What, then, can be said of the authority in an office of oversight, called bishop? What of  
683 “apostolic leadership” and the five-fold ministry of Ephesians 4? What might Lancaster  
684 Conference glean from its history, theology, and the experience of the wider church? How might  
685 bishops, credentialed leaders, agency leadership, and LMC members all find a place of  
686 leadership and exercise power by sharing criterial authority, authority in, and authority on?

687  
688  
689 **Authority of the Bishop:** If McClendon’s understanding of authority has merit, then one can  
690 conclude that bishops in LMC have proximate authority at three levels. They have *criterial*  
691 *authority* simply by being Christians along with the rest of the Christian, Anabaptist, Mennonite,  
692 and LMC community. Bishops also have *authority in* by receiving and functioning in the office  
693 of Bishop as an overseer of particular and connected church affairs. Bishops also may have  
694 *authority on* by virtue of their individual and various expertise and gifting based on their expert  
695 knowledge and experience on a particular subject or practice.

696  
697 In “Bishops in a United Church,” Lesslie Newbigin talks about his experience as bishop in India  
698 for more than thirty years.<sup>46</sup> Although he has a very high view of ministry compared to  
699 Mennonites, his observations are insightful. He describes three primary relationships in which a  
700 bishop must function: to the congregation (particular), to the synod (connected), and between  
701 congregation and synod (between particular and connected). The relationship between bishop  
702 and congregation has similarities to Guder’s discussion of the particular structure. The synodal  
703 connections relate to Guder’s description of the connected structure. Lastly, Newbigin describes  
704 the bishop as administrator in the relationship of the bishop working between the particular and  
705 connected structures. Newbigin also talks about the tasks of the bishop. He identifies five tasks:  
706 administration, leader of worship, leader of evangelism, leader in teaching, and leader of pastoral  
707 care.

708  
709 Stoltzfus identifies a number of these same tasks. The existence of the book, *A Mennonite Polity*  
710 *for Ministerial Leadership*, immediately identifies the administrative task. Stoltzfus indicates,  
711 however, that the role for a bishop must go beyond administration. As argued earlier, the “new

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<sup>45</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Reflections on the December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper,” March 2007, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, “Bishops in a United Church,” in Peter Moore, ed. *Bishops, But what Kind: Reflections on Episcopacy*, London: SPCK, 1982, 149-161.

712 activity” began to get things done and it slowly secured authority of office for the work getting  
713 done as institutions began to form around institutions. Over decades, duties previously held by  
714 the bishops, such as interpreting the Bible, teaching doctrine, overseeing church practices, and  
715 forming new congregations were relegated to institutions. By the end of the twentieth century,  
716 only administrative practices remained for bishops. Credentialing matters and pastoral and  
717 bishop succession came to dominate Bishop Board activities. Stoltzfus provides a quote in his  
718 “Reflections” paper that suggests the error of the bishop acting primarily as a functionary of the  
719 pastoral placement process:

720  
721       When we limit, even if unintentionally, the Episcopal role to placement alone and when we  
722       remove the executive from the times of the gospel-led transition in the systems, we take  
723       away the revelatory space in which God might act. Bishops need to be “in” that space, not  
724       on the side lines.<sup>47</sup>

725  
726 Stoltzfus sees bishops as an essential part of seeking God and leading the people of God in the  
727 ongoing vision and the dynamic life of faith. There must be a willingness to lead (exercise  
728 authority and power) in those “times of gospel-led transition. He continues:

729  
730       “The role of the bishop board must shift to having the majority of time spent as well as  
731       priority of ministry moved toward caring for the whole as it relates to faith and life.  
732       Teaching and helping leaders practice our core values is basic. The time together should  
733       consist of biblical and theological reflection.”<sup>48</sup>

734  
735 When Stoltzfus identifies “theological reflection” and “biblical study” as priorities for the role of  
736 bishop, he changes the long-standing focus of the LMC Bishop Board on the administrative task.  
737 He also calls attention to the need to “mind the faith” that includes such activities as pastoral care  
738 and congregational health issues such as community worship and life in mission.<sup>49</sup>

739  
740 Thus Newbigin and Stoltzfus would find significant points of congruence with McClendon’s  
741 perspective on authority in the church. A bishop functions by virtue of being Christian, through  
742 the authority of the office, and as a result of expertise. Newbigin and Stoltzfus would seek to  
743 expand the tasks of the office of bishop to include far more than the administrative role. In a  
744 sense, those who espouse an “apostolic leadership” are reacting to the limitation of an office of  
745 leadership to the realm of administration. An apostolic leadership seeks to be active in “the  
746 revelatory space in which God might act.”

747  
748 Pilgram Marpeck writes at some length about an “apostolic bishopric” in the context of troubles  
749 in the Anabaptist community in Strasbourg about 1531. He specifically describes the office of  
750 bishop and relates the office to that of apostle. He says,

751  
752       Our carnal flesh sharply opposes the right kind of apostolic bishopric. For this reason,  
753       many turn away from it and, by means of clever excuses and undisciplined, deceptive  
754       teachings, seek to evade it. For, truly, neither reason, wisdom, selfish ambition, honor,

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<sup>47</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Reflections on the December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper,” March 2007, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Dale Stoltzfus, “Reflections on the December 2004 Conference Ministers’ Paper,” March 2007, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Listening Committee from the Thursday Afternoon Discussion on the Office of Oversight and the Role of Conference Minister, Dallas, TX, December 2004, 1.

755 impatience, nor other weeds of the flesh have a place in the kingdom of Christ, especially  
756 in the office of leader, if fruit is to come.  
757

758 The authority of the apostle, bishop, and shepherd is not an authority of ruling or lordship;  
759 rather it is one of humility and lowliness so that nothing is done out of a desire to dominate  
760 others or to advance only themselves. They are servants of God.<sup>50</sup>  
761

762 Marpeck's insistence on humility resonates with Barrett's call for "agreeing and disagreeing in  
763 love" and "a humility about being right." With this background, then, perhaps some suggestions  
764 for an LMC polity are in order.  
765  
766  
767

### 768 **3. Outlines of a Proposal for LMC Governance and Structure** 769

770 In thinking about an LMC structure that addresses past realities, current needs, and future vision,  
771 the following categories may be helpful in building a revised structure: things to keep; things to  
772 replace, things to eliminate, things to add, and missional needs. "Things to keep" indicates that  
773 current structure has much usable past that has merit in the future. "Things to replace" suggests  
774 that any part of the current structure that is discarded needs to have the function replaced in some  
775 way at some level. The exchange of tasks between staff and bishop might occur here. Some  
776 things no longer serve as intended and may need to be eliminated. "Things to add" suggests that  
777 change might involve some completely new things. "Missional needs" indicates that the resulting  
778 structure must meet the requirements placed upon it by the current context.  
779

780 *Things to keep:* bishop as an office of oversight; relational connection between bishops;  
781 "separation, humility, and yieldedness" (they are biblical concepts and connect with the past and  
782 traditional authority); Great Commission, a call to service, and an activism (they are biblical  
783 concepts and connect with the new authority); Bishop Board (although "Board" may no longer  
784 be a useful word) as a structure; respect for authority of office.  
785

786 *Things to replace:* Bishop Board as a congregational problem solving entity; Bishop as  
787 mediator of local conflict; the lack of diversity; the plural centers of identity and authority.  
788

789 *Things to eliminate:* top-down decision making; male-dominated authority structure; Bishop  
790 Board as a drag on innovation and experimentation; institutional push toward individualism and  
791 congregationalism.  
792

793 *Things to add:* bishops as place for missional vision; each bishop accountable to missional  
794 vision; adjectives to office of bishop; bishop as teacher; qualifications for bishop office;  
795 establishment of a selection process for bishops; training for bishops; broader representation in  
796 Conference leadership structures; greater sharing of power; structure that draws on bishop  
797 giftings and skills.  
798

799 *Missional Needs:* find cohesion and convergence from a usable past that leads into the future;  
800 ability of structure to grow as Conference grows; accommodate a variety of church models or  
801 forms; structures to determine both location (fences) and direction (magnets); structures that

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<sup>50</sup> William Klaassen & Walter Klaassen, trs. & eds., *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, Herald Press, 1978, 55f.

802 allow agreeing and disagreeing in love around a core identity; leaders at all levels with a humility  
 803 about being right; a core identity; allowance for diverse activity; structures that stimulate  
 804 innovation, experimentation, risk, and potential failure; structures that promote constant  
 805 evaluation and guide continual adjustment and change; structures that develop existing and new  
 806 leadership; ability to embrace an ethnic and gender diversity in authority structures; structures  
 807 that foster spiritual vitality; clear and easy communication; networks to resources beyond LMC.  
 808

809 Within the Conference, some think that the current structure is viable and only needs its efforts  
 810 redirected into some new channels. Others indicate the need for a more thorough-going change.  
 811 Feedback from the table group discussions at the Spring Leadership Assembly provides  
 812 examples of both views (see Appendix 4).  
 813

814 Bishops need to take back some duties delegated to staff and give up some of their current  
 815 administrative duties to staff. Bishop Board Executive Committee may be a starting place for  
 816 reshaping structure the most profoundly. Bishops who now serve on the Lancaster Mennonite  
 817 Conference Board of Bishops currently function as generalists for the congregations in their  
 818 charge. One alternative might be to organize the bishop role around specialties. This suggestion  
 819 emerged at the 2007 Spring Leadership Assembly.  
 820

821 Recognize that there are different spheres of function that our bishops need to fulfill –  
 822 administrators, spiritual directors, judicatory functions. Perhaps bishops could be called to  
 823 their functions based on spiritual gifting, rather than being called based on geography. This  
 824 would enable pastors and congregations to benefit from the ministry of several bishops.<sup>51</sup>  
 825  
 826



<sup>51</sup> Leadership Asser... se Summary, Lar... ence, March 29, 2007, 2.

827 The prior diagram illustrates a flat arrangement of relationships between bishops and  
828 congregations who serve to resource one another according to gifts and also recognizing  
829 geographic relationships. The diagram illustrates various relationships in contrast to a corporate  
830 diagram that describes the downward flow of authority from Bishop Board to the district and  
831 congregation. This diagram illustrates the role of bishop. It is not intended to describe how  
832 mission might emerge.

833  
834 Bishops relate to a geographic group of churches, but also to the conference as a whole  
835 according to particular gifts of service. This diagram organizes these service gifts according to  
836 the five-fold ministry listed in Ephesians 4:11 and identified by Newbigin and others. Bishops in  
837 this configuration envision the future, guide the vision, equip pastors for service, “mind the  
838 faith,” and build relationships in their district cluster, but they also serve across the Conference  
839 according to their particular gifts. They direct congregations to the resources supplied by the  
840 gifts of other bishops. Agencies function in ways more clearly connected to the Conference. This  
841 model suggests that bishops develop and foster accountability structures among themselves for  
842 their geographic and corporate ministries. This model will require a great deal of trust is between  
843 bishops and between bishops and congregations. 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 lists a number of offices  
844 and gifts. The passage clearly points out that different people have different gifts. Second, the  
845 passage indicates that not everyone has the same gifts.

846  
847 <sup>28</sup>And God has set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly  
848 teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of  
849 tongues. <sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?  
850 <sup>30</sup>Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?

851  
852 Working in the office of bishop according to gifts provides the bishop with an additional type of  
853 authority that McClendon called “authority on”: this was the authority gained by virtue of  
854 specialized skills and knowledge that each bishop exercises both within a regional grouping and  
855 across the conference as need arises for their expertise.

856  
857 Luke’s historical account in the Acts of the Apostles indicates in numerous places that when  
858 early church leadership discerned the activity of the Spirit, they responded by sending people.

859  
860 Ac 8:14 Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the  
861 word of God, they sent Peter and John to them:

862 Ac 11:22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem,  
863 and they sent forth Barnabas.

864 Acts 13:1-3 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers... .

865 <sup>2</sup>As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, “Separate me Barnabas and  
866 Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.” <sup>3</sup>And when they had fasted and prayed, and  
867 laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

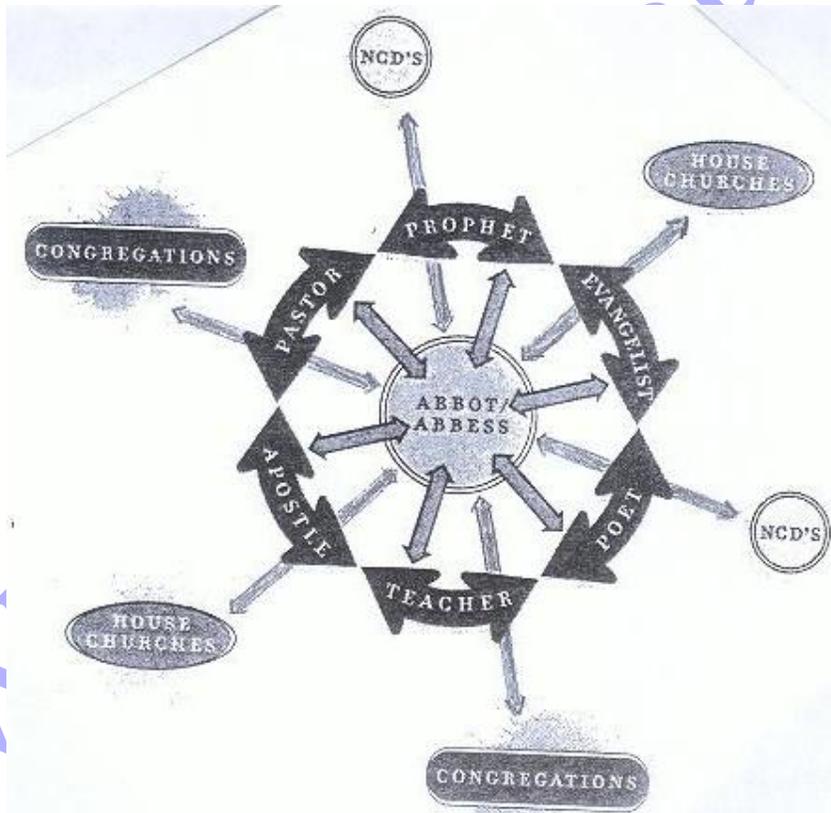
868 Acts 19:21-22 After this, Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and  
869 Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, .... <sup>22</sup>So he sent into Macedonia two of them that ministered unto  
870 him, Timothy and Erastus; but he himself stayed in Asia for a season.

871  
872 In the first two examples, the “sending” is in response to the reported activity of the Spirit  
873 leading people to Christ. In the third example, the “sending” is a response to a task directed by

874 the Holy Spirit but not to a specific place. The rationale for “sending” in the fourth example  
 875 appears to be for the nurture of existing churches.  
 876 Interestingly, Alan Roxburgh, another missional church advocate, provides a similar diagram in  
 877 a recent book that addresses both the “particular” and the “connected” understanding of authority  
 878 as developed above. He addresses the idea of specialties practiced by the oversight team that also  
 879 has similarities to the model of oversight according to gifting.<sup>52</sup> The diagram below, shows the  
 880 prophet, evangelist, poet (liturgical?), teacher, apostle, and pastor roles which relate to one  
 881 another, to a leader peer (abbot/abbess), and to diverse, particular church expressions like  
 882 traditional congregations, house churches, and new church development (NCD, i.e. church  
 883 plants).

885 Roxburgh’s diagram also places authority and leadership inside the circle of the various  
 886 expressions of church. Leadership pushes the church out into mission. The previous model  
 887 visually boxes churches inside leadership, which is not a point intended to be communicated.  
 888 Leadership in Roxburgh’s model must have access to a variety of gifts that can nurture and  
 889 support traditional forms of church, the special needs of house churches, and church plants  
 890 whose more stable expression may not emerge for a number of years.

891  
 892



<sup>52</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling!?!: Leaders Lost in Transition*, ACI Publishing, 2005, 182.

893 When one considers first, that the Anabaptist movement began as a series of new church plants  
894 that had very little form in the first years, imigrated to the New World with a house church  
895 model (the Hans Herr House preserves this past), and later developed a traditional church model  
896 that describes much of contemporary Mennonite experience, it is less difficult to imagine a  
897 future that might have multiple models of church all functioning, being nurtured, and multiplying  
898 themselves within Lancaster Mennonite Conference. Some bishops and some bishop gifts may  
899 have greater affinity for some church models than others. At the least, Roxburgh draws attention  
900 to the potential benefits of the role of bishop changing from “bishop as generalist” to “bishop as  
901 specialist.”  
902  
903

904 **Concluding Remarks:** As the Governance and Structure Task Force moves forward in its work,  
905 it may be profitable to widen the circle of discussion at an appropriate point. In addition to the  
906 planned inclusion of structure and governance experts, other voices to include might be a  
907 selection of credentialed and lay leaders, giving specific attention to include female and  
908 nonSwiss-German Mennonites.  
909

910 The Task Force may find Barrett’s missional polity questions helpful as concrete structures  
911 emerge. Any structures, old or new, that cannot provide a positive response to one or more of  
912 these questions probably is not needed in a missional LMC.  
913

914 How does polity invite people to enter the reign of God?  
915 How does polity help the church in its life together to be a sign of the reign of God?  
916 How does polity put us in right relationship?  
917

918 Further, each structure, existing and new, should each be identified as either a fence that clearly  
919 provides location information or a magnet that clearly provides directional information (and in  
920 some cases both). Fences and magnets that do not provide location and direction information  
921 may not be needed at the level of conference. Second, polity must have structures that insist upon  
922 “agreeing and disagreeing in love.” Third, polity needs to have structures that propagate a  
923 “humility about being right.”  
924

925 If the role of bishop is revised then changes in structure and governance must follow role  
926 changes. Structure may need to be reduced in size, complexity, and cost. Authority and power  
927 may need to be shared among a wider leadership base. Governance may need to be relaxed in  
928 terms of fences, but strengthened in terms of magnets. McClendon’s three types of authority—*in-*  
929 *on* , and *critical*—may serve as a guide for testing new governance approaches. Structure and  
930 governance must serve the missional vision if the missional paradigm is LMC’s future.  
931

932 Missional authority will look and work differently than the current “traditional authority” and the  
933 “new activity/authority” paradigms. Real, meaningful connection with old approaches as well as  
934 a clear direction toward missional leadership are essential if Vision 2010 is to move vigorously  
935 forward..  
936

937 **Appendix 1**

938 REFLECTIONS  
939 on December 2004 Conference Ministers' paper  
940 By Dale Stoltzfus  
941

- 942 1. The writings in the Polity book attempt to restore some redefinition to the office of  
943 bishop, restore authority to care for the total system, especially in areas of core values  
944 and faith and life issues.  
945 2. Theological reflection along with Biblical study becomes a major part of the bishop  
946 board agenda.  
947

948 **Comment from conference ministers:**

949 There seemed to be a consensus among us that caring for the spiritual health of the body is a  
950 vitally important task. Quoting from Dale's paper: we need to "mind the faith, keep core  
951 values focused, provide spiritual care, assist congregations in spiritual discernment on  
952 theological issues and represent the conference." While what we call this task needs more  
953 discussion and discernment, we acknowledge that it has been removed or diminished in our  
954 conferences and needs restoration. Conference ministers should be included.  
955

956 **Introduction:**

- 957 1. A Basic Understanding  
958 a. Bishop – but What Kind paper by Peter Moore  
959 b. Page 151 – last paragraph  
960 c. Page 152  
961 d. Page 155  
962
- 963 2. Our Mennonite polity states that both conference and congregation must be taken  
964 seriously and healthy Mennonite community includes both. The issue is – what is the  
965 balance between the two. A key question that must be answered is what is the role of  
966 the bishop in having a congregation work within a framework that allows for  
967 independence as well as interdependence.
- 968 3. Lancaster Conference has major polarity issues around both faith and life issues. Major  
969 issues around credentialing concerns and practices. (New proposed Ministerial  
970 Leadership Credentialing Commission will help.)
- 971 4. Mennonites have affirmed that the authority of the church is primarily corporate rather  
972 than individualistic. Some current practices (and teachings) from some Mennonite  
973 leaders affirms an understanding of "apostolic leadership" which can tend to replace  
974 the bishop discernment model and corporate discernment.
- 975 5. In order for a shift in understanding of the role of the bishop board to take place there  
976 will need to be a renewal that shifts from:  
977 a. congregationalism to being part of conference  
978 b. personal as ending place to gathered community  
979 c. the personal to the whole

980 Biblical texts – Ephesians 4 "One Lord, one faith and one baptism"  
981 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 speak of "one body."  
982  
983  
984

985 **A quote**

986 “When we limit, even if unintentionally, the Episcopal role to placement alone and when we  
987 remove the executive from the times of the gospel-led transition in the systems, we take away the  
988 revelatory space in which God might act. Bishops need to be “in” that space, not on the side  
989 lines.”

990

991 The role of the bishop board must shift to having the majority of time spent as well as priority of  
992 ministry moved toward caring for the whole as it relates to faith and life. Teaching and helping  
993 headers practice our core values is basic. The time together should consist of Biblical and  
994 theological reflection.

995

996 **One area of concern:**

997 1. Myron’s comment on becoming missional?

998 2. In the desire to be more missional, we have tended to move toward a more generic  
999 Christian theology and been tempted to abandon Anabaptist theology, says Goshen  
1000 College professor John Roth - Franklin Conference.

1001 3. In much of discussion from the post-modern discussion, the office of oversight is  
1002 reduced. The missional language as well as former church growth language also tends  
1003 to reduce the function of the bishop role.

1004 4. We need to reflect on the above as we begin to shift toward a more democratic  
1005 representative model in Lancaster Conference.

1006

1007 **Why Review Now?**

1008

1009 1. Missional agenda

1010 2. The work of the Governance Committee of LMC

1011 3. Reflection on the role of bishop for the future based on recent ordination vote.

1012 4. Post-modern influence which can tend to view authority of bishops as an old tradition

1013 5. There is a call on the part of some groups to reclaim the best of the office of bishop as  
1014 one way to assist congregations at a time of continued polarity around theological and  
1015 leadership issues.

1016 6. Many people of color groups already have respect of the office of bishop and see it as  
1017 an important part of their congregational life.

1018 7. The need to redefine authority as it relates to church faith and life.

1019 8. the need to move beyond the trend toward unbalanced congregationalism to  
1020 connectedness and accountability. Find the healthy balance for our day and our  
1021 mission.

1022 9. the need to redefine leadership (can be individualism) to a new understanding and  
1023 practice of authority. Authority affirmed by those given authority as well as those  
1024 over whom authority is exercised.

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1025 Appendix 2

## **Listening Committee Report from the Thursday afternoon discussion on the Office of Oversight and the Role of Conference Minister**

### **Observations**

1. It was helpful to come to this discussion with a sense of history. Thanks to Dale for helping us with that. However, we also sensed, as we move forward, that while history informs us, we must not be bound by it.
2. We observed the differences among us in terms of what words mean and the stories we each bring to this discussion. The words "oversight" or "authority" have very different histories. Some of us come from settings of significant conference authority and others from places of strong congregational autonomy. Still others have joined this journey from various other traditions.
3. This was an extremely timely and important topic to discuss. As we move along in this discussion, we'll need to unpack many more components of it. Specifically, as many of our area conferences are re-organized, we are defining roles, functions of conference ministers.
4. Woven into and underlying this discussion is the ongoing need for more clarity as to how congregations, conferences and denomination work together and relate to one another.
5. Tom Kauffman's conception framework was especially helpful in beginning to blend the spiritual and functional components of our task as conference ministers. We would invite him to share this in a written form with everyone. We believe it can set a framework for oversight.

### **What we heard**

1. There seemed to be a consensus among us that caring for the spiritual health of the body is a vitally important task. Quoting from Dale's paper: We need to "mind the faith, keep core values focused, provide spiritual care, assist congregations in spiritual discernment on theological issues and represent the conference."

While what we call this task needs more discussion and discernment, especially if we want to address the emerging generation, we acknowledged that it has been removed, or diminished in our conferences and needs restoration.

2. We also heard that this discussion and formation needs to happen in collaborative ways. This needs to be a shared or team ministry and conference ministers must be part of such a team.
3. We heard and felt some tension around how the "office of oversight" (or whatever we call it) but also an important challenge and vision that we will each have to translate in our cultures and stories, and that we need to give each other freedom in doing this. It is more important that we agree on the concept tha[n] to adopt a "one size fits all" model.

### **One suggestion for moving forward**

In response to numerous comments that this discernment continues and in the light of Lloyd's encouragement to engage the wider church leadership in this discussion, we suggest that this become an important agenda item at the upcoming Constituency Leaders Council gathering in Mennonite Church USA and at the March 2005 Leadership Assembly in Mennonite Church Canada.

Listening Committee: John Klassen, Dorothy Nickel Friesen, Duncan Smith, Diane Zaerr Brennehan

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1029  
1030 Appendix 3

To: Conference Ministers, MCUSA and Canada, and persons attending the meeting in Dallas  
From: Dale Stoltzfus, Denominational Minister  
Subject: Review and projections related to the oversight ministry of Conference Ministers  
Date: December, 2004

I was asked by the denominational ministers to write a paper that might assist the persons gathered at our Dallas meeting to reflect on the current and future oversight ministry of conference ministers. Currently a number of conferences are reviewing their structures and reviewing how conferences can best serve congregations and relate to a denomination. This paper is one attempt to assist all of us to reflect on our oversight ministry.

This paper is designed to reflect on the Office of Oversight as proposed in our polity book, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*. The paper is one attempt to assist all persons gathered at Dallas to develop their own perspectives and reflections. It is an attempt to help in our discernment process.

It must be noted that at times my experience and writings may reflect a U.S.A. understanding and thus I trust the Canadians will balance the discernment with their responses.

The committee that wrote the polity book spent hours and sometimes weekends discussing the meaning of words like office, leadership, oversight and leadership. In the end, the committee was in agreement with the writings that were intended for the church. We agreed that the congregations must be accountable to each other through a local conference. The Mennonite Church includes congregations, conferences and the denomination. Congregations are most likely to be healthy and missional when they are joined together in a conference and there is a balance between denomination, conference and congregation. We agreed that there must be an Office of Oversight that has authority to lead on both the conference and denominational levels. While in the past the Office of Oversight was seen as a function of a conference for congregations, the polity book (page 76) notes that at the denominational level there would also be an Office of Oversight for conferences and congregations. There is a desire that all congregations be healthy and growing.

## I. Introduction

In January, 1996 a General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church committee of ten persons finished the writing of *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*. The work and writings of this book took place over an eight year period of time. The writings were intended to assist both the USA and Canadian conferences and congregations. The ten writers represented both Canada and the U.S., as well as General Conference and Mennonite Church.

The writers were aware the very word bishop or overseer or the Office of Oversight

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brought many different feelings and understandings into the discussions. However, it must be noted that the committee was able to come to a common understanding around the Office of Oversight both for the conferences as well as the denomination. The committee was able to come to a shared vision of what might be. The committee decided that they should be prescriptive about the role of oversight, not simply be descriptive of what currently is being practiced or stories of past history.

Some on the committee approached the subject out of an experience with bishops who provided oversight. Others had never experienced any bishop or elder, *Aeltester* oversight. To some, elder meant a bishop oversight, to others it meant lay ministers. The committee came to the table with many different experiences, beliefs and visions about the ministry of oversight. However, as we told our stories we began to realize that historically our oversight practices had much in common, but current experiences were varied.

## II. Historical Understandings and Practices

Most Mennonite groups, prior to 1950, had a practice of lay ministry. Lay ministry is defined as leaders being called from the local congregation. These lay ministers served as pastors, deacons and bishops. They served without a salary and for life in the local congregation. This practice was the accepted form of plural ministry.

The Mennonite Encyclopedia notes that from 1530 onward Anabaptism was a free church movement that developed and practiced a congregational polity. In some areas there were ordained elders or bishops that served several congregations. The current *Confession of Faith* notes that the Office of Bishop was practiced. Several of our Mennonite Conferences have had a practice of having bishops who provide oversight in a conference district.

The *Mennonite Encyclopedia* also notes that in some areas of Canada and the United States congregations related to the General Conference Mennonite Church had the Office of Aeltester. Many Mennonite churches in the United States and Canada have discontinued this Office of Oversight ministry as they have developed area conferences structures.

The book, *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, p. 41-42, states the following as it relates to the Office of Oversight: "For more than four hundred years (1540s-1945) the theology and patterns of ministry remained relatively constant. The threefold pattern of ministry (bishop-preacher-deacon) served as the common model for most congregations in North America. An implicit message was communicated that the ministry of the congregation was spiritually lodged in these offices." . . . "Bishops were responsible for the spiritual and organizational life of the congregation, including church discipline. Preachers shared in the pulpit ministry, and deacons administered the alms fund."

The book, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, p. 60, notes the following as it relates to the threefold ministry pattern: "In the New Testament the earliest references to leadership mention disciples and apostles. In I Timothy 3, bishops and

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deacons are named. We also see a threefold pattern emerging in the New Testament: bishops, elders, and deacons. In the Mennonite tradition this threefold pattern can be found as well.”

The polity book (pages 56-57) notes that for the General Conference Mennonite Church some communities retained the traditional pattern of elder-Aeltester/preacher/deacon while many groups shifted to a model where each pastor became a “full service minister” and were no longer dependent upon an Aeltester. Across the church, especially some areas of the United States, there was a gradual shift from the plural form of lay ministry to having one or more paid pastors.

Since the 1950’s, almost all area conferences of the Mennonite Church have shifted from having oversight reside in the Office of Bishop to the current conference minister model. The Office of Bishop held authority and some power. Bishop authority was to a large degree relational in nature. Most conferences shifted to or developed for the first time a form of oversight not understood to be in the form of an office. Usually the title was conference minister. The primary role was to provide resources for congregations during times of conflict, transitions and point congregations to denominational resources. In some conferences one conference minister was expected to provide resources for many scattered congregations. Lancaster Conference is the only conference, U.S. and Canada, that practices the Office of Oversight in the original Bishop model. Many conference ministers would not see their role as providing oversight for the faith and life issues of the conference and congregations.

As the committee was developing writings about our conference structures related to oversight, they noted that there were many different patterns. Some conferences had one conference minister, some conferences had a conference minister and overseers, and others had a conference minister and a team of assistants and one conference had a conference minister and bishops.

In the book, *The Heart of the Matter*, edited by Erick Sawatzky, Ross Bender, on page 18, states the following as it relates to the shift over the years from plural ministry, including oversight ministry: “We were concerned that the Mennonite Church was moving away from a shared plural ministry composed of leaders called out of the congregations they served.” There was an ongoing debate over the years about the model and form of leadership in the church, including oversight. Discernment about theological issues did not seem to have priority for those persons in oversight.

### III. Current Oversight Practices

The polity book, p. 46, states that the adoption of the statement “Leadership and Authority in the the Life of the Church” by the 1981 Mennonite Church General Assembly was a benchmark for the church in its attempt to reformulate its view of ministry and ordination. The document recognized the shifts that had occurred in the 1960s and 1970s and began cautiously to reformulate the church’s position. It recognized the ministry of all person, affirmed the importance of leadership

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ministries, and encouraged shared or plural ministry. From that period of time there began to be more discussion about a return to some practice of oversight, pastoral leadership and lay ministry, a new model of plural ministry in which not all persons in leadership would emerge from the local congregation.

The writings in Section III in the polity book began to note the importance of the Office of Oversight in both the denominational and conference bodies. A major concern of the writers in this section of the polity book was that there needed to be a return to the Office of Oversight where authority for caring for the spiritual, theological and organizational life of the church resides. The role was not to simply be a functional role.

The proposed Office of Oversight was not simply to be a return to the past practice but to reclaim the best of the practice in which attention would be given to denominational and conference core values and theological agreements and not to defining outside boundaries. The Office of Oversight would assist in congregational faithfulness to what is described as the center of our faith.

While Lancaster Conference has a Board of Bishops who function in the Office of Oversight, they too struggle to understand how to shift toward guarding conference core values, especially in the area of credentialing persons for ministry.

#### **IV. Reflections related to the current and future ministry of oversight**

This is an excellent time in the life of our denominations to reflect on the future ministry of oversight. We must develop a vision for the future and not simply react to our past history.

Our understandings and practice of oversight must continue to emerge based on our understandings of becoming missional congregations, conferences and denominations. We must be prepared for new “wineskins for the new wine.”

Our polity and our structures have been influenced by a variety of factors including a reaction against authority, new expressions of the ministry of all members and a growth of church programs that provided vision and resources for congregations. There was debate about the meaning and need for ordination.

The shift from the Bishop model to a conference minister model has been helpful in strengthening congregational discernment, lay ministry and the empowerment of the pastoral role. Without an Office of Oversight it has been difficult for conferences and primarily congregations to stay in alignment with agreed upon core values and statements of faith. Many congregations who have left conference affiliations in recent years struggle to agree with conference or MCUSA core values and to relate to conference oversight.

We struggled during the 1960's through the 1980's to know how to address the variety of ethical issues, including sexual misconduct as well as how to address leaders who lead congregations out of a conference. The denominations and

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conferences were not able to lead with authority from a spiritually centered core but rather attempted to manage situations as they emerged. Denominational and conference statements in the 1990's attempted to address this concern and have been helpful.

The polity writings point toward a new understanding and practice of the Office of Oversight. While the writings talk about each conference having a conference minister it is also clear that the current ministry practice of the conference minister is not a full expression of the Office of Oversight. What needs to shift is a practice where the persons entrusted to minister in the Office of Oversight not only provide resources but also "mind the faith," keep core values focused, provide spiritual care, assist congregations in spiritual discernment on theological issues and represent the conference.

The polity book noted that the new vision of oversight was not a call to a practice of domineering or authoritarianism. There was a desire to reclaim our understanding of a three-fold ministry that truly valued spiritual authority within the life of the congregation as expressed in the:

- Office of the Laity/Deacons
- Office of Pastoral Ministry
- Office of Oversight

I would like to outline a few ideas related to the three offices.

## 1. **Office of the Laity/Deacons**

The Office of the Laity/Deacons is an important part of the ministry team. It might be helpful to shift from the term elder if part or all of their role is administrative or governance. The ministry of deacons or lay ministers should be experienced as part of the ministry under the guidance of the lead pastor. Lay ministers/deacons should have a defined focused ministry role as they serve in the ministry team.

It might be helpful to have lay ministers and deacons credentialed for their ministry so the office has more authority. The license for specific ministry might be used or a new credential that can be registered in the conference with some accountability.

## 2. **Office of Pastoral Ministry**

The pastor must function in the office as a spiritual leader who cares for all members and spends more focus on the training of the team, persons in the Office of Lay Ministry, to assist in the work of ministry. (Ephesians 4)

Pastors must see themselves as one part of a three-fold ministry, a part of plural ministry. They must be trained to function in a ministry team.

## 3. **Office of Oversight**

There has been a shift in how the denominational offices have understood their

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role in providing oversight to the conferences. The denominational ministerial leadership offices are not the only groups that provide oversight. The CLC group provides insight and resources to the Executive Board and staff. However, the denominational Ministerial Leadership staff work directly with congregations. Thus there is some direct relationship between those who provide oversight in the denominational and conferences offices.

Some ways in which the denominational offices have shifted toward providing oversight are:

1. We have developed "guidelines" at the request of conferences.
2. As a staff we began in the early 1990's to have regular extended staff retreats.
3. We began to lead sessions at our conference ministers meetings where we provided time and leadership for the group to minister to each other.
4. As staff we kept in more regular contact with conference ministers, often traveling to local conference locations.
5. We took time in our conference minister meetings for worship, ministry for healing and commissioning each other for our ministries.
6. There has been more time given to the teachings and practice of spiritual disciplines and the use of spiritual directors.

Historically the denominations and conferences have had two basic functions:

1. Resourcing congregations and pastors
2. Coordination and governance in a variety of ministries

In both of the above areas an important role has been to define and maintain core values. For instance, in area number two, coordination and governance, conferences have held the credentials of all persons credentialed. Conference ministers have had a key role in both the interviewing process and the resourcing of pastors and congregations.

The two roles for denominations and conferences noted above continue to be important roles both at present and for the future. They must be kept in balance. As congregations become missional more time and energy must be provided for congregations in the resourcing area. Because of the trends toward congregationalism, it may be helpful to strengthen or introduce the Office of Oversight so that all parts of the church follow agreed upon core values and move forward as denominations.

There is no one model for all conferences due to our history, our traditions and the differences in conference numbers. In some conferences the conference minister serves both in the executive role and in the resourcing of congregation and pastor role. In recent years the role of the conference minister has been shifting from an executive secretary role to a role that has some components of the Office of Oversight. However there is not clarity around the role of conference ministers and congregations are not always sure where and how to be accountable for faith and life issues. Thus it might be helpful to redefine a new practice of the Office

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of Oversight for all conferences and then define how resourcing, governance, regulation around core values, and congregational support takes place. Less time will be given to management details and more time should be provided in helping congregations accept and understand denominational and conference core values and help in the alignment process. There should be more focus on the identity center, the core values and assisting congregations in doing theology and being missional.

The proposed movement toward a new understanding and practice of the Office of Oversight should include a practice of plural ministry. It might mean that part of the Office of Oversight will include the governance area and part the resourcing area. For instance, in Lancaster Conference the recent issue of becoming a full member of MCUSA forced each bishop to decide if they were sitting in the bishop board as a single bishop who happened to be in the same room with other bishops or if they were members of the bishop board team. Commitment to a team approach and discernment as a team is difficult work but is at the heart of being Anabaptist and functioning in the Office of Oversight.

It might be helpful to develop new terms or titles for the oversight person in some communities and some cultures. As the Mennonite Church becomes more missional and new cultural groups are part of the Mennonite church, we should recognize that some cultures already have respect for the Office of Oversight and desire to use the term bishop. We do not need uniformity, but we should be open to use terms that have meaning to all cultural groups so that there is continued respect for the office.

While conferences should place more resources in oversight ministries and provide resources for all areas of congregational life, conferences should be open to changing existing conference lines. There should be less concern for history and tradition and more focus on how congregations can be missional in their local community and grow in their faith and life.

The Mennonite Church must find new ways to shift from some forms and practices of congregationalism to strengthen the denominational and conference oversight ministries. Funds will be needed for this shift.

1039 **Appendix 4**

1040 **LANCASTER MENNONITE CONFERENCE**

1041 **LEADERSHIP ASSEMBLY**

1042 **TABLE GROUP RESPONSE SUMMARY**

1043

1044 **MORNING SESSION:**

1045 **1. Considering Keller's five points, what might authority look like in a missional church**  
1046 **community?**

1047

1048 Leadership

1049 • Servant leadership – Jesus lead while serving //

1050 • Release persons into roles of leadership that embraces diversity. ///

1051 • Authority would look more like empowering/equipping ministry. ///

1052

1053 Mission

1054 • The missional church is united and orderly, which requires leaders, to work at the  
1055 churches mission. //

1056

1057 Core Values

1058 • We need to be teaching Anabaptist values because of the many voices our people are  
1059 hearing through the media. //

1060

1061 Locus of Authority: Christ, Congregation, God, Bible

1062 • Authority is connected to scripture. //

1063 • Spiritual authority originates with Christ, the head of the church. ///

1064 • Diverse, local, distributed authority. Decentralized. Authority is shared. ///

1065 • Emphasis on everyone's authority as an ambassador of Christ. //

1066 • Authority resides with the people, in faith community. //

1067 • Recognition of authority of God is paramount. //

1068 • Authority that is confirmed by signs and wonders.

1069 • What is the role of prophetic authority?

1070 • Bishop Board needs to reclaim more authority.

1071 • To accomplish Keller's 5 principles it will take some kind of (centralized?) authority.

1072 • Authority needs to lie in broader setting than credentialed leaders.

1073 • Less [authority] in conference/more in the congregations.

1074

1075

1076 **2. To join with God in mission, how might we best organize LMC?**

- 1077 • There was little agreement among us related to this question.

1078

1079 Core Values

- 1080 • Bishop board to give core values. //

1081 Question: when core values conflict with local autonomy, how to handle the differences?

1082

1083 Congregational or Conference authority

- 1084 • Congregation ///

- 1085 • Conference ///

- 1086 • Both/And //

1087

1088 Structure

- 1089 • Structured around mission. ///

- 1090 • A structure that releases and empowers rather than control and power. //

- 1091 • Some wonder if LMC should be more like a ministerium – congregations participate in activities that they embrace, don't participate where their conscience says no.

- 1093 • Recognize that there are different spheres of function that our bishops need to fulfill – administrators, spiritual directors, judicatory functions. Perhaps bishops could be called to their functions based on spiritual gifting, rather than being called based on geography. This would enable pastors and congregations to benefit from the ministry of several bishops.

- 1097 • Good as is. Bishop Board is making a strong effort to listen to the local congregation. A method of having bishops rotate throughout the conference so we can all benefit from each. Heb. 13:17

- 1100 • How do we allow people “who don't look like us” reach us? Persons of color need to be at the table and in leadership roles.

1102

1103 Discernment/Consensus not voting

- 1104 • Consensus needs to reach all levels not just the bishop level. ///

- 1105 • The way we decide things (democratic vote) is this the best way? //

1106

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1110

1111 **AFTERNOON SESSION:**

1112 **1. How do you see the missional church, reconciliation, the Kingdom of God and authority**  
1113 **all converging in LMC?**

- 1114 • Work together in unity (not uniformity) but hold on to diversity. ////////////////
- 1115 • Jesus is the center. ////////////////
- 1116 • Don't forget evangelism while being missional. //
- 1117 • There is a need for change within conference in the area of structure. //
- 1118 • Discipleship is the center of who we are.

1119  
1120 **Notable Individual Comments**

- 1121 • Increase cooperation between EMM and LMC.
- 1122 • Look at people and situations from Christ's view. We are ambassadors for reconciliation.
- 1123 • Our conference is oriented toward bounded set rather than centered set. Centralization of  
1124 power makes it difficult to move away from cultural conditions. Envisioned a conference  
1125 oriented around core values – leadership facilitates the conversation with diverse groups.  
1126 Authority dwells with a delegate body. Ordination doesn't come with power. Greater buy in.
- 1127 • We heard diversity is okay, and we have an opportunity to be a witness to many others in how  
1128 we manage it. We need to redefine non-conformity, and live that out.
- 1129 • A consideration of women representation among the Bishops (a percentage) not necessarily  
1130 ordained as bishops – if we even keep that terminology.
- 1131 • Counseling with the 1/3 who voted against the proposal to find out what gives them the strong  
1132 convictions to reject the bishop's recommendation.

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1135 **Appendix 5**  
 1136 **FENCES**  
 1137

Structure	Culture
Credentialing / behavior of pastors	Aftermath of rules/disciplines
Position statements	Differences in geography, cultural, language, other traditions, provincialism
Policy statements	Membership
Bishops	Authority
Rules and consequences	Dogmatic arrogance
Agency and Fraternal Organization structure	Marriage
District structures	Political involvement in church decisions
Bishop Board	Untrained, bi-vocational
<i>Confession of Faith in A Mennonite Perspective</i>	Mennonite game / traditions
Constitution	Styles of worship
Belief statements	Foreign missions are more strongly supported than local mission or leadership
Baptism and church membership	Baptism and church membership
Church discipline	Church discipline
Divorce and remarriage	Divorce and remarriage
Gender issue	Gender issue
Peace	Peace

1138  
 1139  
 1140 **MAGNETS**  
 1141

Structure	Culture
Understanding of discipleship	Non-violence
Service orientation	Spiritual freedom
MDS, MEDA, MCC, etc.	Size of congregation
Free church	Mutual aid
Mission emphasis (EMM)	Sense of community
Baptism, inviting families	Congregational priority
Vision 2010	High value of family
Core Values	Christ centered worship
Mission Statement	Meeting needs of larger community outside of building
Accountability	Practice witness of peacemaking
Dwelling in the Word	Word and deed theology
Events (VBS, WBS, CCL, LA)	High value of Scripture
Moms groups, day care, material aid	Inspiring worship
Small cell/house groups	Rising leaders to participate
	Peace

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Appendix 6

Bishop Board Responses to Section 3: Outlines of a New Structure

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**CREDENTIALING POLICY AS A BOUNDARY (FENCE) *discernment of location (in or out)***

**How does the credentialing policy invite people to enter the reign of God?**

- Sets the guidelines: qualification, role descriptions and accountability of credentialed leaders.
- This is a magnet question – yet the credentialing process is helpful for determining the boundaries
- Help us screen leaders to support the mission of the church.

**How does the credentialing policy help the church in its life together to be a sign of God’s reign?**

- Discerning our core values – our understanding of the reign of God. Helps create sense of unity of purpose.
- Attempts to match the leader with the congregational needs and profile.
- Helps the church maintain clarity of identity and maintain strength of a unified voice.

**How does the credentialing policy put/keep us in right relationship?**

- Provides an oversight on the activity and effectiveness of the leader. Thus a credentialing body of persons will be functioning on a continuing basis.
- With common commitment to being part of a community with core values – with valuable/defined core values.
- To have an orientation for new leaders helps individuals know what it means to belong. Helps develop commitment to core areas of agreement.

**How might the credentialing policy foster “agreeing and disagreeing in love?”**

- How we choose pastors. A point of reference for determining agreed upon “standards” and determining “direction” of our movement.
- Prescribes a process for discerning responses to issues that arise. (The credential is given to a person who personally can agree to use the process.)
- The “agreeing and disagreeing in love” statement could be an addendum to credentialing policy as a part of a leaders commitment.

**How might the credentialing policy demonstrate “humility about being right?”**

- Provide a required teaching on how to be humble in being right before credential.
- Our history can inform our inability to be humble about being right!! How can we live in the present – with conviction – in light of the lessons of history?
- To have an emphasis on “outreach priority” versus a “house keeping” priority. Have policy that outlines the need and commitment to resolve differences in a peaceful way.

1190 **OFFICE OF BISHOP AS A CENTER (MAGNET) *discernment of direction (movement)***

1191

1192 **How does the office of bishop invite people to enter the reign of God?**

1193 • The office ideally can provide leadership; the legacy which we have received does make a  
1194 difference in our perception of the office.

1195 • Paul as magnet – all things to all people. Press congregations to be clear about mission. Be  
1196 teachers – pastors & conference.

1197

1198 **How does the office of bishop help the church in its life together to be a sign of God’s  
1199 reign?**

1200 • Congregation stay on task – missional vocation.

1201 • Much of the influence of the office is indirect through others, especially through pastors.  
1202 The role of intercession is important for the bishop.

1203

1204 **How does the office of bishop put/keep us in right relationship?**

1205 • To what extent is the role of the bishop for the good of the congregation / the good of the  
1206 conference?

1207 • Help congregations realize connectedness to larger body of Christ. Mennonite Church not  
1208 open to other denominations? Encourage regular attendance.

1209

1210 **How might the office of bishop foster “agreeing and disagreeing in love?”**

1211 • Provide balcony perspective. Weigh various viewpoints. Need accountability in structure.  
1212 Magnet vs./ Fence – seeing the Bible as a whole – Holistic view.

1213 • The bishop can be a fair-minded, non-partisan helper.

1214

1215 **How might the office of bishop demonstrate “humility about being right?”**

1216 • The character of the bishop is significant, the modeling of what it means to be a follower of  
1217 Jesus. The character and modeling of the spouse can be critically helpful in ministry.

1218 (obviously, the reverse can be the case as well.) We can be humble, yet also be purposeful.

1219 • Bishops have high enough commitment to each other – 80%+ - all stand and stay. Stand  
1220 with or resign. Don’t credential an unteachable spirit. Foster emotional maturity.

1221

1222

1223 Note to Brinton: I’m reminded of the help and limitations of metaphor. “Fence” is quite  
1224 different from the airspace metaphor, which you used.