

What does it mean to be Brethren in a VMC World?

We are living in a time of great change. There is a great spirit of cooperation among Canadian denominations and ministries. People (including pastors) are moving from churches of one denomination to another. What we have in common is of greater priority than our differences. All of this is very good. But it is harder to know how we should think about identity in this changing world. What does it mean to be Mennonite, Baptist, Pentecostal, Alliance, Salvation Army or Brethren? Those who are new to our churches would like to know something about the group they are becoming a part of. And those who have Brethren roots are looking for new ways to express their identity in ways that are relevant for this generation. The following is intended to stimulate and bring direction to that dialogue. So, what does it mean to be brethren in a VMC world?

1. We know and acknowledge our origins in the family tree of Christianity.

- a. The origins of the Brethren are to be found in a “restoration movement” that began and flourished in the United Kingdom from 1825 to 1850 and spread around the globe. From the beginning Brethren congregations were a part of a "believers' church" movement as opposed to churches with state/government connections.
- b. The majority of its primary leaders were from the Church of England. This root of Christianity influenced the Brethren to be more Calvinistic than Armenian and to have a stronger emphasis on communion than is common among evangelical churches. In contrast to the state churches of England most Brethren practice believer’s baptism by immersion.
- c. The focus of the Brethren was on a radical restoration of New Testament Christianity and Church life with particular emphasis given to:
 - i. The unity of the church based on unity in Christ
 - ii. Unity through weekly communion where Christ himself presides.
 - iii. Unity through diligent attention to Scripture.
 - iv. The simplicity of the New Testament church, an organism not an organization.
 - v. The elimination of the distinction between clergy and laity.

- vi. Devotion to Christ expressed in: holy living, evangelism, missions and service to the needy.
- vii. End times prophecy and the development of dispensational theology

d. The Brethren are known variously in Canada as Brethren, Christian Brethren, Plymouth Brethren, or the Assemblies.

e. The Brethren we are related to are mostly from the open Brethren branch of the historic Brethren movement, although influences from the exclusive or closed branches are found among open Brethren. (For more information see My People by Robert Baylis)

2. We know and acknowledge diverse networks of Brethren rooted congregations.

a. Brethren related congregations exist in most countries of the world.

b. These congregations fall into four general and sometimes overlapping categories:

- i. Exclusive or closed Brethren
- ii. Gospel Halls or similar expressions of legalistic Brethren church life
- iii. Fellowships that have a strong allegiance to the “traditional assembly ways” of doing things.
- iv. Congregations which assume the freedom to adjust their historical ideals in light of their sense of mission, present culture and Scripture.

3. Vision Ministries Canada connects with the leaders of Brethren rooted churches with whom we share a common sense of mission and values.

a. Their values and ideals find reasonable expression in the statements of faith and conviction in the literature of VMC.

b. They tend to have the following in common:

- i. Relationships with individuals, missionaries, churches and camps

- ii. Common history and theological background
- iii. Primary leaders in the church have Brethren roots though the majority of the congregation may not
- iv. Higher emphasis on communion and the ministry of elders than most evangelical churches
- v. Less emphasis on the distinction between financially supported pastors and volunteer leaders
- vi. Not inclined toward the practice of ordination or licensing as practiced in other evangelical denominations
- vii. May not feel that they are Brethren according to the traditional definitions, but are unlikely to join any other network of churches
- viii. They have struggled with or are wrestling with their Brethren heritage in the following areas: (for more detail, see Appendix A)
 - ✘ Three which they talk about
 - a. Worship, Breaking of Bread/Communion and Music
 - b. Women, and the role of women in the church
 - c. Leadership, decision making processes, governance and pastoral roles
 - ✘ Three which they tend not to talk about
 - a. History - how does or should Brethren history influence present practice?
 - b. Identity - how should we answer the question, "So what kind of church are you?"
 - c. Interdependence and autonomy - are we autonomous or interdependent?

4. We are committed to carrying forward the original ideal of the oneness of the church.

- a. By working cooperatively with the churches of our community.
- b. By working cooperatively with Vision Ministries Canada which associates us with similar minded Brethren church leaders in our region and country.
- c. We are open to working with similar VMC - like networks in other countries.
- d. By participating in interdenominational activities in general.

Gord Martin
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Vision Ministries Canada

Appendix A

Six Difficult Areas for Brethren Related Congregations

1. Three subjects about which there is much dialogue

a. Worship, Breaking of Bread/Communion and Music

- i. Worship, is it primarily about remembering the death of the Lord in the traditional Brethren manner? Or is Biblical worship a broader theme?
- ii. Breaking of bread or Communion, the most distinguishing feature of Brethren church life, has lost its lustre. It is quite common to see only a third to half of those who attend the preaching service in attendance at the “Breaking of Bread” service. The form or shape of this service was born in a nineteenth century restoration/ renewal movement. It is commonly assumed that if spiritual vitality is recovered, the form or shape of the service will not require change. But the whole Christian community has changed, music has changed, the questions people are asking and wrestling with have changed. To insist on a nineteenth century format and style of music for twenty-first century worship is an unreasonable demand. Those who were spiritually nourished in the traditional Breaking of Bread service will find it difficult to relinquish its beauty and strengths. But it is time to move on. It is more realistic to focus on the Biblical purpose of communion as well as the vitality of the Spirit; and to welcome a Biblical form for communion that supports this renewed approach.
- iii. Communion related questions must be resolved by accepting current realities: appealing to Scripture while acknowledging the influence of Brethren history and congregational customs

b. Women, and the role of women in the church

- i. The Brethren have made “silence in the church” the central point in their understanding of a woman’s role in congregational gatherings. This has led to much confusing dialogue about what constitutes a meeting of the church where this principle must be applied and has further led to inconsistent and confusing practices regarding silence and covering. It may be more helpful to make authority the pivotal discussion point rather than silence since the principle of authority invites more flexibility and less legalism. The only passage that appears to require complete silence (I Corinthians 14:34) should be interpreted in the light of its immediate and broader Biblical contexts.

- ii. Questions related to the role of women in the church have been more difficult for Brethren congregations than for other evangelicals because of their immediate implications for the breaking of bread service
- iii. There are four broad positions to consider on the role of women in the church.
 - 1. The traditional and often inconsistent brethren practice
 - 2. A more consistently practiced hierarchical view which focuses on male authority and female submission rather than on silence
 - 3. The complementarian view which encourages both men and women to serve according to giftedness while retaining some gender based distinctions such as not allowing women to be elders, not preaching in the primary services, etc.
 - 4. The egalitarian view which dismisses all gender based distinctions related to ministry in the church

c. Leadership, decision making processes, governance and pastoral roles

There has been much ambiguity about church governance and leadership throughout the history of the Brethren. There are two particular reasons for this absence of clarity.

- i. Many of the early Brethren believed that the office of elder had ceased. See articles “The Triple Tradition” - *The Origin and Development of the Open Brethren in North America* by Ross Howlett McLaren published in the Emmaus Journal (Winter 95 through Summer 97)
 - 1. This broadly propagated belief influenced a decision making/leadership practice lasting over a hundred years which may be described as follows:
 - a. The decisions of the churches were made in men’s meetings which included all of the men who were “in fellowship”
 - b. The men who were the most influential carried extra weight in the men’s meetings and in the congregation but were not formally recognized as elders nor did they have regular elders meetings. The practice of leadership through informal influence therefore became firmly established
 - c. The decision making practice in each assembly was supported or supplemented by the ministry of itinerant preachers and by the influence of these preachers at area-wide conferences.
 - d. Many North American open Brethren congregations did not move to the practice of having “recognized elders” until the 1960’s and 70’s. And when they did, they did not resolve what the future role of the congregation would be in decision making, how long elders would serve in that capacity

or precisely how decisions would be made when there was a lack of consensus. The old idea of informal influence continued as a primary factor in the decision making process

- ii. They also emphasized very strongly that the church is an organism not an organization.
 - 1. Their reaction against the spiritually deficient but well organized churches of their day led them to deplore and avoid organization in their congregations
 - 2. The conviction was that if the church is spiritual, is led by the Holy Spirit and honours Christ as its head, organization will not be necessary
 - 3. The implication was that having statements of faith was wrong, having church constitutions that spelled out a decision making process was wrong, having clearly defined offices of leadership was wrong, having an organized way in which churches could make plans and decisions together was wrong and providing organized directions and supervision of missionaries was wrong, etc.
 - 4. The Bible teaches that there should be freedom and order, there are gifts of administration and the church is an organism and a flock with shepherds, a race of priests, a building, etc.
 - 5. There should be clearly defined leadership and pastoral roles which provide needed service to the church and which can legitimately be aspired to by emerging younger people.

2. Three subjects about which there is little dialogue

a. History - how does or should Brethren history influence present behaviour?

Since most books on Brethren history are dreadfully discouraging and tedious, it's easy to understand why so few are attracted to them. But we do have history and we must find a way to acknowledge it, process it and move into the future with a clear sense of where we have come from. Many attempt to dismiss their history as if it were irrelevant to our sense of identity. Imagine your daughter coming home and telling you that, "I met this really wonderful young man. The only thing that is a little unusual about him is that he has no history." It would be a little unsettling wouldn't it?

- i. Dr. Rod Wilson says that there are three common Brethren approaches to history:
 - 1. Contemporary Churches, not into roots - if it is modern it must be right
 - 2. Denial Churches, ignoring roots - let's forget where we came from
 - 3. Stifled Churches, obsessed with roots - if we did it that way before it must be right

- ii. It seems best to acknowledge our past, identify its best features, interpret them in light of our present generation, mingle them with current realities, establish our mission and faithfully move into the future with our eyes focused on the sufficiency of God rather than on security rooted in the past.

b. Identity - how can we answer the question, “So what kind of church are you?”

- i. This has been a particularly difficult question for anyone who grew up in a Brethren congregation. We were taught to say: “We are just Christians”, “New Testament Christians”, or “We are kind of like the Baptists but without having a pastor,” or “We believe some like Billy Graham.” To the more church-wise we would say “We are with the assemblies, are Brethren or Plymouth Brethren.” But, try going from door to door doing outreach in your neighbourhood with those kinds of identity markers!
- ii. In more recent years it’s been common to say that we are an independent, a non denominational or a community church. Neither of course are quite true as we will see in the next section
- iii. We need to find a historically true way of describing who we are that gives us present tense believability and which identifies us clearly in the modern world of churches.
- iv. How about this. “Our church is part of a network of churches that emerged years ago from the Church of England. It’s a lot less formal and our churches are independently governed. We work together with an umbrella organization called Vision Ministries Canada and are affiliated with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.” It may be that if we focus long enough on what we are called to be and do by Jesus Christ that we will come to establish a legitimately positive reputation.

c. Interdependence and autonomy - are we autonomous or interdependent?

- i. **Autonomy**
 - 1. Brethren congregations seem to be independent and autonomous, that is until they say or do something that doesn’t sound quite right to other Brethren people or congregations. It is amazingly difficult for an individual Brethren church to change its style of leadership, worship, communion, name, music, names of services, their view on women in the church, their affiliations with interdenominational agencies, etc. etc. The difficulty in making changes is related to normal change-related challenges of course. But more than that, they are viewed as being a kind of betrayal of Brethrenism. So how autonomous

are Brethren congregations if they so freely label others who make minimal changes as no longer being Brethren? How non denominational are they when they share common support for camps, support common mission agencies and missionaries, have common history, common relationships, common ways of doing things and yet are ready to dissociate from those who don't see eye to eye with them about matters of style, form and tradition which have little or no Biblical foundation?

2. Autonomy or independence in churches is at its best when it facilitates decision making at the grass roots level, when its sense of financial ownership is maximized, when it adapts easily for the sake of accomplishing its mission, and when it releases creativity and freedom at the level of each local congregation.

ii. Interdependent

1. Although Brethren congregations do have common relationships, history, traditions and support common camps and missionaries it is very difficult for them to work together in a truly interdependent fashion. To ask Brethren congregations to put together a cooperative vision for reaching their city, province or country, to put together common plans for discipleship or training or to solve some problem jointly raises all kinds of resistance. The churches are too autonomous for serious cooperation and there are many fears that proceeding with any kind of large joint project would make them seem like a denomination, something that provokes all kinds of unease.
2. Brethren churches should establish clearly the manner in which they wish to express their autonomy and interdependence: both with other Brethren churches and with churches of other denominations. The church of the New Testament was a dynamic network of purposeful churches that were relationally connected. It was not highly organized yet its leaders, both within them and among them wielded remarkable influence. Interdependence requires a functional ministry of leaders among the churches of the network. Vision Ministries Canada facilitates processes whereby Brethren rooted churches can retain their autonomy while enjoying the benefits of interdependence. When churches are helpfully interdependent they have a comprehensive functional vision for ministry, they multiply their resources, they provide aggressive care for churches and leaders that are in crisis and they collaborate strategically with other compatible networks of churches and ministries.