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## ***A Direction Lens on the Mennonite Brethren***

***Eliza Mok***

The articles in *Direction* journal over the past thirty years reveal an emphasis on the Bible and a continual effort to inform readers of Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren theology and history. There are also frequent discussions in articles related to Anabaptist distinctives, such as ethics, mission, evangelism, and mutual service.

Delbert Wiens, in “The Questions We Face,” published in the first issue of the journal (January 1972), summarized crucial questions that needed to be addressed. Besides questions concerning the practice of faith, the summary includes items such as the interpretation of Scripture, theological trends among Mennonites, denominational distinctives, the justification of the Mennonite Brethren denominational identity, and the identity of Mennonite Brethren.

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*Mennonite Brethren theology and historical practices have considerable strengths, but there are also weaknesses which cause me some uneasiness.*

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Scholars have written regularly concerning Anabaptism in the past few years and have suggested ways to “draw a boundary around the diverse the Anabaptist tradition”<sup>1</sup> and to unite churches.<sup>2</sup> Discussions and arguments on issues such as education, church growth, structure, and Confession of Faith are often made with reference to the appropriate expression of Anabaptist distinctives. Nevertheless, the reprinting of “The Questions We Face” in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of the journal (spring 1997) hints that many of the previous questions are yet unanswered. {221}

### **ISSUES NEEDING ATTENTION**

The following four issues have been selected for discussion, not be

have attracted most attention, but because they significantly affect and development of the church and so are worth our deliberation.

### **Mennonite Brethren Identity**

The struggle of identity seems to have occurred since the coherent German-Russian ethnic-religious group was threatened by changes in American society and the influx of various Protestant doctrines. Internal and external changes led to diversity in theology, ethnicity, and church practices. Despite voices calling for a return to Anabaptist roots, the church continues to diversify and more members are ignorant of the meaning of being a Mennonite Brethren. Lynn Jost said in 1998 that "a complete consensus about these questions is no more among us," and he thought that the outcome of the Confession of Faith would show that "MBs can agree theologically about the deal."<sup>3</sup> The 1999 revision of the Confession is now the only expressed commonality among all members. However, is a mere agreement to the Confession of Faith adequate to define the identity of the Mennonite Brethren?

The introduction of the Confession of Faith states that Mennonites are Anabaptists rooted in the sixteenth-century Reformation and hold to Simons' perspective that Jesus Christ is the foundation of faith. The Confession contains all the essential elements of the Anabaptist faith, but previous elements such as repentance, authentic conversion and its resultant fruits, and obedience to Christ, which reflect basic Anabaptist theology, have been reduced or substituted with lighter words,<sup>4</sup> perhaps to suit the "diversifying church."<sup>5</sup> Unless the local churches have thoroughly understood Anabaptist theology, appreciate its significance, and made an effort to encourage the expression of Anabaptist distinctives in their churches, members can hardly understand the meaning and appreciate the preciousness of being Mennonite Brethren. Such an approach on the other hand, would be an asset for building unified and committed communities.

To help members on the identity issue, I suggest the following: first, offer history and theology courses both to pastors and to lay leaders, and implement soon as possible the 1999 Conference recommendation to have new pastorate complete specific Anabaptist courses;<sup>6</sup> second, encourage churches to offer simplified history and theology courses to their members; third, encourage introductions to and active discussions of Anabaptist history, theology, and church practices in the {222} *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and the *Christian Leader* rather than solely in *Direction* journal; fourth, circulate and promote

Anabaptist videos among the churches; and fifth, ensure that all n have a copy of the Confession of Faith.

### **Weakening Denominational Loyalty**

Mennonite Brethren Mission and Service (MBMS) International c a survey on five thousand North American MB church members and pa spring 2000. The report of this survey points out that there is a “contin weakening of denominational identity as a perceived asset,” a “dilution automatic loyalty to denominational agencies,” and a rise in expectatio: service rather than support.<sup>7</sup> Already in 1982 Marvin Hein believed tha growing spirit of independence threatened the cohesiveness of Mennor Brethren churches.”<sup>8</sup> In 1991 he and Herb Neufeld were of the opinion “persuading people that the conference is prior to the local church will difficult.”<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have noticed that churches are moving toward local auto they follow the individualistic trend of the society around them. Some l have called for a return to a more biblical corporate faith;<sup>10</sup> others have strengthen the relationship between denominational agencies and local churches.<sup>11</sup> I agree with the view that the mainstream independent styl has moved churches away from the Conference, but I think the followir contributed to increased alienation. First, the allowance of complete au eliminates any need of periodic communication between the conferenc churches. The humble position of the denomination merely to serve lik parachurch lacks the initiative and power to keep churches together.<sup>12</sup> the weakening understanding and treasuring of Mennonite Brethren id the local churches dilute their interest and loyalty to the denomination. there is inadequate staff to coordinate and share with pastors and chur members. Especially is this true of those coming from non-MB backgrc including various cultural groups and those in newly-planted churches.

To strengthen denominational loyalty and encourage a sense of be there is a need, first of all, for leaders of the various conferences and ch be aware of the urgency and seriousness of the issue and to develop a v regarding it at all levels.<sup>13</sup> The report of the MBMS International surve alarm that should be brought to the attention of all leaders. A study cor focusing on the denomination may be a good way to begin. Second, pre to strengthen Mennonite Brethren identity need to be carried through. {223} and local conferences need to take initiative to plan and work in t

Third, scholars and leaders have to write more frequently in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* or the *Christian Leader* regarding the importance and of corporate faith. Fourth, different denominational agencies need to work together to ensure efficient use of resources and effective communication encouraging to see a copy of *Witness*, the MBMS International magazine enclosed in a recent edition of *Mennonite Brethren Herald*.<sup>14</sup> A similar effort with the district conferences is desirable, as it helps to strengthen relationship between the denomination and local churches. Finally, the conference or denominational agencies may invite volunteer workers from different churches to join them in various tasks of coordination or promotion plans and projects. I agree that it is a difficult task to go against the mainstream culture of individualism; however, it is not impossible if Mennonite Brethren leadership is willing to put extra effort in this area.

### **Ethnicity in Relation to Evangelism**

The continual effort of Mennonite Brethren to plant churches among different cultural groups requires attention to some problems in this area. In 1988, Paul G. Hiebert had recognized the "critical tension between evangelizing other ethnic communities around (the Mennonite Brethren) and maintaining their own corporate identity."<sup>15</sup> He analyzed the tension between the new ethnic daughter churches and pointed out that it was important to prepare the conference and Mennonite Brethren congregations for future inter-ethnic fellowship.<sup>16</sup> He also emphasized the need for churches to be based on theological rather than an ethnic identity, and for leaders to help Christians mature by making Christianity their most fundamental identity.<sup>17</sup>

I appreciate Hiebert's insight in this area, but I am afraid his voice has not been adequately heard. Mennonite Brethren have worked hard to evangelize among different cultural groups and helped some to build their churches, but in good will to respect autonomy and others' cultures, they have not helped new churches understand the danger of ethnocentrism and the importance of integrating into the larger "family" of Mennonite Brethren.<sup>18</sup> The previous experience of Mennonites in the struggle of transition, their familiarity with Canadian society, and their resources for ministry are especially precious for churches consisting of first- and second-generation immigrants.

I would like to affirm Paul Hiebert's counsel to keep Mennonite Brethren informed of church planting in ethnic groups, to build bridges of fellowship among them, and to restructure the conference to give these {224} leaders both

power.<sup>19</sup> I also make the following proposals. First, church planters and pastors for ethnic churches should complete courses in Anabaptism and understand their responsibility to build Anabaptist churches. Second, the denomination needs to thoroughly understand the theology of the new planters and pastors and their thoughts about Anabaptism. Third, the *Confession of Faith* should be translated into the languages of the new churches. Fourth, it is important to invite volunteers from new churches as early as possible to translate conference news and to do coordination work. Fifth, a relationship should be built with the English-speaking second generation of these churches providing them advice and resources. After all, continual communication and concern are needed to help the new ethnic churches grow and become true Anabaptists.

### **The Ordination of Women**

It is surprising that discussions on the gender issue have not been in the *Direction* journal, especially in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Sandra Plett confirmed that "Mennonite Brethren are among the most conservative of the five groups included in [her] research."<sup>21</sup> There have been changes in the times since her report, and Mennonite Brethren churches today are urged by the General Conference to affirm women for ministries in all decision making and leading tasks except that they cannot be ordained and lead as senior pastors.

This article is not the place to express my personal position on the issue, but I am puzzled that Mennonite Brethren local churches are resistant to regard to the placement of women in positions of senior pastoral leadership though a statement on the role of women is not part of the *Confession of Faith*. Compared to the generosity allowing a large diversity of theological stances including even the basic peace stance which was once worth dying for—allowing pastors of other doctrinal backgrounds to lead in their own way—it is difficult to see an inconsistency in this matter.

Issues regarding women in leadership were discussed and voted on at the General MB Conference Conventions of 1981, 1987, 1993, and 1999; yet it is amazing that despite the presence of "a great deal of unclarity concerning the meaning and function of ordination"<sup>23</sup> and the inconsistency between the traditional pastor model with the heritage of multiple leadership, Mennonite Brethren scholars and leaders have been reluctant to make more studies and discussions in this area in order to encourage a "reconsideration and revitalization of our understanding of ordination and of ministry."<sup>24</sup> {225}

Such an attitude is not beneficial or healthy for the church. In fact current position, which encourages women in all leadership roles except considered illogical and inconsistent by many. Two surveys carried out revealed little increase in women's leadership during the previous sixte However, the surveys focused only on the number without understandi cause of the phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Both conference leaders and periodical ed should continue to invite study and discussion on the gender issue so tl Mennonite Brethren can have "a much more reflective and consistent a the Bible," "a renewed love for each other," and an increasingly effectiv in the church.<sup>26</sup>

### REFLECTIONS

Studying Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren history is an ambivalen experience for me. On the one hand, it helps me to know the origin and the denomination to which I currently belong and which I appreciate. C other, there are some notable doctrinal differences between the Menno tradition and those of my Chinese church heritage. The possible loss of salvation, for example, contradicts the general belief in eternal security Chinese churches. I sometimes wonder how these churches, which sup Calvinistic theology of predestination and preservation and a Presbyter organization, could have joined the Mennonite Brethren family.

While it seems that this type of diversification is considered accep today's Mennonite Brethren Church, it is striking to read David Ewert's written almost twenty years ago. He noted that unity was an important all Christians, yet "since we belong to the North American Conference c Mennonite Brethren, the unity of these churches concerns us most at tl moment." He continued, "All of us . . . have to decide which church we identify with in doctrine, practice, and mission." He considered loyalty denomination important, and pointed out some inappropriate example diversity that still exist in certain ways in our churches.<sup>27</sup>

I agree that a denomination is more than just a loose connection c diversified local churches for the purpose of support. It is hard to unde members of these congregations can develop a sense of loyalty toward t denomination and of unity with other Mennonite Brethren churches. Y than attributing the problem to personal integrity, I prefer to understa situation as a "misunderstanding."

I am still learning what it means to be Mennonite Brethren in a multi-ethnic group in North America. Since most of today's first {226} generation immigrants understand English, I wonder if cultural difference is a good reason to organize according to ethnic group, and whether such groups are encouraged to associate only with churches that speak their native language. I wonder how a minority ethnic church can be a true "local" church with a congregation considered "international" (i.e., somewhat foreign), and how its English-speaking second generation can be helped to develop a strong sense of belonging.

Mennonite Brethren theology and historical practices have considerable strengths, but there are also weaknesses which cause me some uneasiness. I had a hard time struggling with them as I came to learn about them, and am unsure whether I want to remain Mennonite Brethren despite my support of A.M.B. Being a female within an ethnic minority group, there are already enough challenges to overcome to lead effectively in the church. Perhaps God will make clear that I should continue to bear the Mennonite Brethren name. But I may be reluctant to do so if remaining MB does not help to release but rather adds to my difficulties.

#### **SUBJECT ANALYSIS OF *DIRECTION* JOURNAL, JANUARY 1972 TO SPRING 2002**

In conclusion, I offer some brief comments on topics addressed by *Direction* since its inception based on the Subject Index located on the *Direction* website ([www.directionjournal.org](http://www.directionjournal.org)). This evaluation may be compared to the detailed analysis a decade ago by Richard Thiessen, "A Bibliometric Study of *Direction*," *Direction* 21 (spring 1992): 83-93. *Direction* was first published as a quarterly journal in January 1972 and was released semiannually beginning in 1983. From October 1978, most articles in each issue focused on a theme determined by *Direction's* Editorial Council. The presence of a theme no doubt places constraints upon the contribution of each author.

From 1972 through spring 2002, *Direction* published 731 articles (in addition to book reviews). Most articles have been tagged by more than one subject category, with an overall average of about two per article. Since approximately one fourth of the articles have only one tag (e.g., editorial or research), those tagged more than once have an average more like three per article. Care is thus necessary when comparing the number of articles in one category with those in another. For example, it would be incorrect to conclude that *Direction* has published nine times as many articles on biblical studies

NT = 105) than articles on Peace/Justice/Nonresistance (twelve) | some of the latter articles are also tagged for biblical studies. The {227} for each article on *Direction's* web site (currently issues from 1990 to th displays the subject tags at the top of that web page.

Here are some comments concerning the data displayed on the accompanying chart:

(1) Categories with more than fifty articles include Mennonite Bre Church History, Biblical and Systematic Theology, Ethics, and two of th subgroups. This demonstrates the emphasis of Mennonite Brethren on upon practical faith, and on the priority effort to remind readers of thei roots. The high number of articles in these areas may also reflect the st interest of MB scholars in these areas of research. The Church category gains a high position due to its broad coverage, and its generality make to tell which issues are of most concern. Although some of the subject t apply to the same articles, the numbers indicate that approximately two *Direction* articles are concerned with these issues.

(2) The next twelve categories with less than fifty articles are writt the earliest days of the journal in the 1970s yet also extend until the pre These topics reflect the practical issues of concern to scholars/leaders a effort in keeping the denomination in the right direction according to A theology and hermeneutics. The frequent discussions of ethical issues i need to continually help Mennonite Brethren live a holy life in the worl to lifestyle, peacemaking, and faith in the market place. Leadership is c important, and discussions regarding education have been numerous, e all Christian and Religious Education categories are considered togethe Contemporary Thought, Evangelism/Conversion, and Church Growth : that reflect the Mennonite Brethren emphasis on the expansion of the l and its connection with contemporary issues. Ministry and the Ministe with Preaching (note Worship just below it) indicates the ongoing conc church leadership.

(3) Discussions on Ethnicity, Environment, and Other Faiths/Cult a later time than most other categories, while topics that reflect concer early Mennonite Brethren immigrants, like Economics and Politics/Sta not been discussed since the mid-80s and early 90s. Changes in society church have brought attention to new issues but less to the ones that w previously controversial. It is surprising that discussions regarding Ma

the Family have not been kept up in the previous seven years.

(4) Issues attracting low attention may be due to the {228} of the p category, but it is interesting that not much has been written on the En (only five articles), an area in which there were sometimes problematic in Mennonite history, and on Spirituality (ten), which is of importance Christian life. Ministry items on Youth (seventeen), Women in the Chu (twenty), as well as issues on Peace/Justice/Nonresistance (twelve) also seem to be particularly popular. {229}

This essay is a slightly revised version of a paper originally submitted to Prof. Bruce L. Gu course entitled "Anabaptist/Mennonite Brethren Studies." The course is offered annually t Brethren Biblical Seminary, British Columbia campus, and explores a combination of histo theological, and polity issues as they relate to the Mennonite Brethren experience. The as asks students to browse and selectively read through a complete set of *Direction* (starting While browsing, they are to note the more prominent issues that have engaged the leade Mennonite Brethren during the past approximately thirty years. From this perusal they m what they consider to be four of the most pressing issues that the Mennonite Brethren ch today, and write a short paper in which they outline suggestions for the way forward on e issues.

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#### Articles and Subjects in *Direction* from 1972 to Spring 2002

Subject Category	No. of Articles	Year of the First Article	Year of the Last Article
Mennonite Brethren Church History	151 20.7 %	1972	2002
Church	86 11.8 %	1972	2002
Theology: Biblical and Systematic	83 11.4 %	1972	2001
Ethics	56 7.7 %	1972	1997
Bible: Old Testament	54 7.4 %	1975	2001
Bible: New Testament	51 7.0 %	1973	1996
Bible: Hermeneutics	48	1973	2001
Anabaptist/ Mennonite History/ Theology	45	1972	2002
Leadership	41	1972	2002
Mission/ International Church	37	1972	2001
Theology: Practical	36	1973	2001
Contemporary Thought	34	1972	2002
Evangelism/ Conversion	34	1974	2002
Renewal/ Church Growth	34	1972	1999
Education: Christian	30	1977	2002
Mennonite Brethren Higher Education	30	1975	2001
Ministry and Minister	30	1973	2000
Preaching	29	1972	1999
Politics/ State and Church	27	1976	1994
Worship	26	1972	2000
Marriage and the Family	25	1972	1995
Ethnicity	23	1983	1999
Discipleship	21	1976	2001
Literature and the Arts	20	1973	1999
Women in the Church	20	1972	2000
Poetry and Prose Fiction	19	1974	1998
Work/ Vocation	19	1972	2001
Economics	18	1978	1985
Interchurch Relations	18	1978	2001
Youth	17	1974	2002
Music	13	1972	1998
Ordinances	13	1979	1997
Science and Religion	13	1977	2000
Sociology	13	1972	2002
Counseling	12	1978	2002
Peace/ Justice/ Nonresistance	12	1978	2002
Social Action	12	1978	2002
Environment	11	1992	1998
Spirituality	10	1980	2002
Other Faiths/ Cults	9	1983	2000
Education: Religious	6	1980	1988
Spiritual Conflict	6	2000	2000
Anthropology	5	1973	2000
End Times	5	1972	1999
Theology: Historical	5	1981	2001
Philosophy	2	2001	2001
<b>Miscellaneous</b>			
Editorials	84	1972	2002
Biography	31	1975	2001
Research	28	1976	2002
Direction Journal	10	1972	2001
Reader Response	4	1974	1983

Total Articles: 731 (most articles have multiple subject tags)

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**NOTES**

1. For example, Frances F. Hiebert suggested a Christ-centered Anabaptist distinctiv  
Frances F. Hiebert, "Apples, Oranges, Anabaptists, and Mennonite Brethren," *Dir*  
(July 1982): 3-11.
2. David Ewert suggested unity in diversity; David Ewert, "Can We Have Diversity w  
*Direction* 11 (July 1982): 20-28.
3. Lynn Jost, "Reflections on Confession of Faith Revision," *Direction* 27 (spring 199
4. The 1902 Confession of Faith contains these words on repentance and conversion  
repentance unto life, to see his sin, repent of it, confess and forsake it" (p. 14); "Th  
Christ is composed of all that through true faith in Christ (p. 19) . . . the true Chur  
fruits of conversion and of the right faith in Jesus Christ" (p. 20); found in J. B. To  
*Pilgrimage of Faith* (Winnipeg, MB, and Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1993), 31, 40, qu  
*Confession of Faith of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, Americ*  
(Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1917), 14, 19, 20. In the 19  
Confession, people are saved when they "turn from sin, entrust their lives to God,  
Christ as Lord," and the church is "the people called by God through Jesus Christ  
respond in faith. . . . Church members commit themselves to follow Christ in a life  
discipleship" in *Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Bret*  
*Churches* (Winnipeg, MB, and Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1999; third printing, Nov.  
Abraham Friesen considers the omission of references to Menno and of an empha  
following Christ's teachings as integral to the Great Commission (both of which m  
in the 1902 version) to reveal inadequacies in the 1975 Confession as well as that  
Abraham Friesen, "An Anabaptist/Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith," *Dir*  
(spring 1998): 26-27.
5. Jost (p. 59) says that the Confession is a unifying confession for a diversifying chu
6. A recommendation was accepted in the General MB Conference Convention of 19  
time pastors who have not studied at an MB institution are to complete approved  
in MB history, theology, and polity within two years of their appointment. Imple  
the recommendation, which was the duty of the provincial and district licensing b  
to be made. See {231} Carmen Andres, "Revised Confession Embraced by Delega  
*Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 6 August 1999, 9.
7. According to Harold Ens, ed., ". . . What You Told Us," *Witness* (January-April 20  
International hired a private consulting firm, Ken MacLeod and Associates Inc., to  
thousand Canadian and two thousand American MB church members and pastor:  
how Mennonite Brethren feel and think about faith, global mission, and the role c  
International.
8. Marvin Hein, "Retrieving the Conference 'Glue,'" *Direction* 11 (July 1982): 12.
9. Marvin Hein and Herb Neufeld, "Two Responses to J. B. Toews," *Direction* 20 (fa
10. *Ibid.*, 17.
11. Taking the survey report seriously, MBMS International has begun steps to "stren  
reconceptualize, and fully resource the constituency relations portion of its work.'
12. David Wiebe, Executive Director of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches, sai  
presentation regarding denomination on May 3, 2001, in the Anabaptist History c  
Associated Canadian Theological Schools (ACTS), Langley, BC, that denomination

parachurch and have to earn the right to serve. While commending the humble at Conference, I am astonished that encouragement of unity is not considered as its responsibility. Isaac Block stated in 1991 that the conference's (which conference? statement included a vision for structural coherence and placed such responsibility on pastors. I believe some work on unity needs to be initiated by all the conferences. Block, "Two Responses to James Nikkel, Church Growth Leadership Theory and Mennonite Brethren Theology," *Direction* 20 (fall 1991): 99.

13. As a member belonging to one of the ethnic Chinese churches, I understand that some leaders consider the denomination a "wealthy" organization that provides help and resources to local churches. By submitting a membership fee, we think we have fulfilled our responsibility, yet we often submit less than what we should. Our main focus of work and mission is the Chinese community and missionaries. We are thankful for MB help in our initial establishment, but we really do not know the Mennonite Brethren very well. As a result, I do not see much difference between MBs and the Alliance, Evangelical Free, or Baptist churches. {232}
14. *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 12 July 2002.
15. Paul G. Hiebert, "Ethnicity and Evangelism in the Mennonite Brethren Church," *Direction* 16 (spring 1988): 87.
16. *Ibid.*, 95.
17. *Ibid.*, 100.
18. Donald R. Jacobs, "Ethnicity: Friend or Foe?" *Direction* 28 (spring 1999): 63.
19. Paul G. Hiebert, 95-96.
20. There were six articles during the 1970s. A special theme on women invited six more articles. There were only three in the next ten years from 1981 to 1990. Four came in 1995 and five in 2000.
21. Data was collected in a survey carried out in the early 1970s. See Sandra Plett, "A Survey Toward Women as Reflected in Mennonite Brethren Periodicals," *Direction* 9 (January 1972): 22.
22. According to Carmen Andres (p. 9), "In 1993, the Board of Faith and Life (BFL) passed a resolution 'to allow for diversity of conviction and practice in appointment of women in pastoral leadership,' but the delegates did not accept the resolution." The General Conference of 1999 passed a resolution brought by BFL to "clarify" the position of the General Conference regarding women in leadership. The resolution "encouraged women 'to minister in every function other than the lead pastorate' and to 'exercise leadership on Conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions, and agencies.'" (p. 10)
23. Timothy J. Geddert, "The Ministry of Women: A Proposal for Mennonite Brethren," *Direction* 18 (fall 1989): 71.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Connie Faber, "A New Look at Women in Ministry," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 1997, 16.
26. Geddert, 71.
27. Ewert, 22-23; quotations are from p. 22. For example, Ewert says, "when a church is 'presbyterian' (rule by elders) rather than 'congregational,' then we have a departure from the Mennonite Brethren understanding of the church, and that makes for disunity" (p. 22) "whether a church should be considered genuinely congregational if that congregation is encouraged or led in a process of decision making."

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