

## **The Meanings of Membership: A Response to “The Church ‘Without Spot or Wrinkle’: Testing the Tradition”**

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In 1998 my wife Lois and I were formally accepted as “members” of a Mennonite Brethren church. The decision to proceed with the formal membership process did not come easy for us. Although we had been committed to, and actively involved in, the life of this congregation for almost five years, various individuals would periodically prod us, saying, “We’d love to welcome you into the church,” or “When will you become one of us?” Such insider/outsider language of belonging struck us uninitiated newcomers as odd particularly since we had never been made to feel such distance in our relationships with people in the congregation at any other time. Despite being well-intentioned, such comments did nothing to stimulate a desire for “membership” (whatever it meant), and did more to confirm a growing suspicion that the word “membership” within the Mennonite Brethren carried multiple layers of meaning. Our experience has stimulated an ongoing curiosity for exploring more broadly the question of what did, and what does, membership mean for the Mennonite Brethren? So, this paper is not merely an academic response to an historical question, it is also part of an ongoing personal quest.

Walter Unger’s paper offers an informative overview of one particular theological emphasis in the Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren approach towards baptism and church membership, along with some of the internal dynamics and tensions created by this emphasis. Unger’s focus is clearly a prescriptive selection designed to highlight the theological ideal to which the denomination once adhered, and to which he believes the denomination should once again strive to return. I will leave aside responding to the theological debates that his promotion of a “pure church” ecclesiology is sure to generate; instead, I will extend his historical overview to include a variety of other aspects of membership that were not included in order to create a more comprehensive backdrop for identifying and understanding the multiple nuances the word “membership” has acquired for time. In order to bring more clarity and precision to the Mennonite Brethren use of the word “membership,” it is necessary to identify and untangle the various strands of meaning that have become twisted together, often without differentiation. This multiplicity of meanings (often non-theological) have been a contributing factor to the current confusion and division about the relationship between baptism and “membership”: put simply, the word “membership” does not mean the same thing to all people.

Moreover, to identify and debate only the theological emphases when discussing baptism and membership is not enough. This is not to minimize the theological challenge issued by Unger, but it is to say that any discussion about baptism and membership must include a consideration of the relationship between culture(s) and the theological affirmations and congregational practices within the Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren traditions. Consistent adherence to the same theological affirmations might well be a worthy ideal, but because theological affirmations are never spoken into a cultural vacuum one must assess periodically whether the intended meaning of the theological affirmation is still being understood in the same way. My response to Unger’s paper will largely be an overview highlighting the way different cultural contexts have add to the practice of baptism and church membership a range of non-theological, i.e., political, social, organizational, meanings.

## Political Connotations

The practice of adult baptism was used by the sixteenth-century "Brethren," as they preferred to be called, as an indicator of a person's understanding of the church as an uncoerced, voluntarily gathered congregation of true believers committed to a life of discipleship. The practice of adult baptism represented a rejection of the territorial church model in which baptism had both civil and religious significance, that is, children upon baptism were recognized as both members of the church and citizens of the region. Because of the close alliance between church and civil government at the time, the rejection of infant baptism had immediate political significance. Regardless of the biblical and theological language used to explain and justify the practice of believer's baptism, identification with an Anabaptist congregation constituted an appeal for religious freedom and toleration: it was an act of radical (and often costly) political protest. Those who advocated adult believer's baptism were identified, pejoratively, as "Anabaptists" (rebaptizers); such a title carried with it an associations of schism and sedition thereby legitimatizing the persecution of these radicals. The memory of some radical apocalyptic and revolutionary extremes within the broader Anabaptist movement generated considerable suspicion of all Anabaptists as a socially dangerous and politically disruptive movement. Anabaptists did not agree on all matters: Unger rightly recognizes that the "evangelical" Anabaptists in the Netherlands quite intentionally tried to distance themselves from those involved with the Muenster debacle through their emphasis on pacifism and strict internal discipline. The widespread (but not unanimous) Anabaptist refusal to take the sword and to swear oaths only widened their separation from the territorial church model and from civil society and its government. Without minimizing Unger's emphasis on the relationship between believer's baptism and the accountability and discipline of church members, the Anabaptist emphasis on believer's baptism was also a statement about the need for a political arrangement that could accommodate a broader range of religious diversity. The severity of their persecution is one indication of the potency of the political critique inherent within their theological ideas. The Anabaptist movement has often been credited with laying the foundation for subsequent political arrangements that have been based on the principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion.

In Russia, the act of baptism had somewhat different political implications. At the time of the origin of the Mennonite Brethren in 1860, Mennonites still lived in isolated colony enclaves. Baptism and ensuing church membership formalized the identity of each individual within the colonies as a Mennonite, that is, someone entitled to a specific set of privileges (and limitations) as outlined by the terms of the *Privilegium* granted to the Mennonites by Catherine II in 1788.

The decision to be baptized within a Mennonite Brethren congregation in North America carries none of the political associations outlined above. At best, the only political implication of baptism and membership within a Mennonite Brethren church today is the recognition of such individuals as persons who are part of a "voluntary society" with charitable status and property tax exemptions.

## Social Dimensions

For Mennonites in general, participation within church life has always carried with it a variety of social dimensions. The commitment of baptized members to mutual accountability, and the acts of care and compassion extended to other members have contributed greatly to Mennonite congregations becoming close-knit social communities. Moreover, baptism and church membership have historically helped define a sense of personal identity for Mennonites that reinforced boundaries that guided friendships and marriage. Among Mennonites, baptism has sometimes functioned, in the language of sociology, as a rite of

passage for young people—a kind of Mennonite bar/bat mitzvah! This was perhaps most explicit in Russia where baptism was deemed a prerequisite for marriage and full-fledged membership within Mennonite communities. This carried over into North America where baptism was encouraged at the “appropriate age” during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In Canada, most incoming Mennonite Brethren immigrants settled in close proximity to other Mennonites. While the practices and theological emphases that set them apart from other Mennonite groups might not seem all that significant to non-Mennonites, these differences created definite boundaries within communities populated primarily by Mennonites. Membership within a Mennonite Brethren church carried with it a theological, and consequently also a social, identity distinct from that of other Mennonite groups. Marriage to non-members was strongly discouraged. During the 1920s and 1930s, Mennonite Brethren numbers multiplied with the influx of a new wave of Russian Mennonite immigrants who were sometimes identified as “Russlaender.” These incoming immigrants soon came to dominate the Mennonite Brethren congregations in Canada: their open attitude towards education, their aggressive approach towards leadership, and their willingness to settle in urban regions, helped define the flavour of the Mennonite Brethren within Canada. The cultural differences between the Russlaender and the earlier Mennonites immigrants (known as Kanadier) reinforced the social boundaries already present because of theological differences. There is some truth to the occasional accusation that the Russlaenders considered themselves to be culturally superior to the more passive, traditional, and less educated Kanadier Mennonites.

The Mennonite Brethren distinctiveness helped reinforce the importance of local congregations as the place in which members experienced a sense of belonging and acceptance (and which some found too claustrophobic). In a few Mennonite locales, where the Mennonite Brethren numbered the majority within community life and were largely able to define the cultural norms, church membership sometimes became associated with social elitism and exclusivity: the desire to give priority in business to fellow church members, and the desire to support fellow church members in their bids for leadership positions and job opportunities within the community inadvertently (and sometimes not so inadvertently) established patterns of social and economic marginalization of other non-MB groups in community life. This generated considerable resentment and resistance to Mennonite Brethren evangelistic efforts in these locales.

In Russia, and for many decades within Canada, membership within a Mennonite Brethren church was virtually synonymous with a particular German-Russian ethnic identity. Considerable debates have taken place among Mennonite Brethren about the value of retaining the word “Mennonite” because of this ethnic association. This association has diminished considerably as successive generations of Mennonite Brethren have exchanged a German-Russian ethnicity for an English-Canadian ethnic identity (sometimes mistakenly seen as being “non-ethnic”), and as the denominational church-planting initiatives have started congregations among a wide variety ethnic groups.

My sense is that many of the more exclusive social dimensions described above have diminished considerably, although aspects still linger depending on the congregation and region. New pastors in older Mennonite Brethren churches still occasionally encounter a range of reactions (sometimes surprisingly hostile, and often from parents and grandparents) when they try to remove “inactive” members from membership. Social dimensions will always be a part of healthy congregational life; ideally, membership within the church should erase sociological distinctions—race, ethnicity, class, gender—created elsewhere. All would likely agree that it is a good thing when church members extend acts of care and compassion to others, which then help friendships to begin and to deepen, and which help create bridges for introducing people to Jesus Christ.

## **Organizational and Legal Associations**

Likely the most common associations with membership today have to do with a variety of organizational and legal aspects. The word conjures up images of business meetings, Robert's Rules of Order, elections, record-keeping, committees and boards, constitutions and budgets. It has not always been this way.

During the sixteenth century Anabaptist congregations did not have any legal status, therefore it was difficult to create formal organizational structures. While re-baptism clearly identified an individual as someone willing to be associated with the Anabaptist movement, the sixteenth-century Anabaptist groups did not keep membership lists in the same way that the Mennonite Brethren did in Russia and North America. During times of severe persecution only select leaders were knowledgeable about the entire network of sympathizers and committed Brethren.

The situation was much different among the Mennonite Brethren in Russia. Despite some ambiguity at the outset as to their legal status as Mennonites, they soon enjoyed the same privileges and constraints as other Mennonites in Russia. As the small, scattered house groups, which characterized the MB movement in its formative decades, became larger, the denomination began to design more formal organizational structures and procedures. This included maintaining a careful record of those who had been baptized by immersion (which in a good many instances meant re-baptism for new converts) and of those who were officially considered members of the group. Only members were subject to church discipline, and only members were granted the privilege of partaking of the Lord's Supper, and considered eligible for leadership positions and eligible to participate in congregational meetings where decisions were made concerning the selection and appointment of leaders.

The practice of maintaining membership lists continued in North America. As conference structures developed, such lists served as a convenient mechanism for identifying individuals in "good standing" who could transfer their membership to another MB congregation when relocating, and for calculating and collecting "norms," that is, the financial resources used for conference ministries. This system still remains in use today in a somewhat modified form. And at each Canadian conference, a statistical report of membership is presented (although a significant number of congregations do not regularly update their numbers). Democratic principles and procedures further shaped the organizational structures and practices utilized by Mennonite Brethren churches.

In North America, membership in a Mennonite Brethren church acquired an additional legal dimension. In order for churches in Canada to issue tax receipts for donations received, Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) has specific rules that organizations wishing to be identified as charitable organizations must follow. Documents must be filed with CCRA that outline the organization's purposes and the boundaries within which it has to operate. These documents must include (among other things) a description of its organizational structure, the provisions for the replacement of its directors, and a clause stating that "the organization shall be carried on without purpose of gain for its members, and any profits or other gains to the organization shall be used in promoting its objectives." Because Mennonite Brethren congregations do have charitable status, membership within such a congregation entails certain legal responsibilities. The various organizational aspects of membership in a formally constituted institution is one reason why, in some congregations, children who are baptized are not permitted to vote within congregational meetings or hold leadership positions until they reach the age of eighteen.

Membership clearly entitles Mennonite Brethren individuals to a certain legal status, and to certain privileges and responsibilities within a larger organization. The degree to which the

organizational and legal dimensions have come to dominate the meaning of "membership" has prompted some to argue for modifications in organizational practices in order to differentiate more clearly what is merely a practical (or functional) convention for helping a large group of people work together to achieve a common purpose, and the deeper theological meanings of membership within a local body of Christian believers as well as membership within the larger universal, invisible church of Jesus Christ.

### **Echoes of Sacramentalism**

The sixteenth-century Anabaptists explicitly rejected the sacramental efficacy of infant baptism in favour of adult baptism. For good reason, therefore, the Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition has been seen as a reaction against sacramentalism. Among Anabaptists and Mennonites, baptism and the Lord's Supper have generally been understood as "signs" and therefore referred to as ordinances instead of as sacraments. They emphasized repeatedly that the water of baptism, and the bread and wine of the Lord's supper do not carry with them some mysterious divine power. However, while being careful not to overstate the significance of this point, it is important to acknowledge the occasional presence of sacramental echoes within the Anabaptist and Mennonite practice of baptism and church membership. Unlike the previous discussion about organizational and legal aspects of membership, which have become increasingly more evident and prominent as time went on, the sacramental echoes have become more faint over time, and are currently not much of a factor. Nevertheless, for the sake of a comprehensive overview, they are worthy of mention.

While Anabaptists affirmed that salvation begins with God's gracious act through the work of Jesus Christ, they also argued, unlike the Protestants, that Christ's atonement for sin could only be made operative within the individual if there was obedience expressed in works of faith. The emphasis on the necessity of an individual appropriating God's salvation inevitably assigned to humanity a part in the process of salvation. Further, as Unger notes, many Anabaptists considered the gathering of the regenerate saints, the true church, to be a sacrament where the physical presence of Christ was made manifest on earth. Of particular interest here is the place of baptism and membership within such a sacramental ecclesiology: throughout their history, Anabaptists have never been able to conceive of the possibility of baptism that did not automatically result in membership within a community of believers that was to be characterized by purity and holiness. Baptism was *the* step in the process of obedient discipleship that signaled entry into the visible church. The ban, as Unger also observes, played a sacramental role within the life of the true church in maintaining a standard of holiness among members of the true church. It is not difficult to see how such a combination of theological emphases might, in the minds of some, come to give baptism at least some salvific value (if not necessity), and how membership within the visible church could become an indicator of soteriological status.

Although Mennonites have always explicitly repudiated baptismal regeneration, the inseparable linkage between baptism and membership in the "church" has on occasion been carelessly misconstrued to mean that baptism is an integral step in the process of salvation, or that ongoing membership in a local church is an integral part of maintaining membership in the universal, invisible church. After decades of isolation and rather limited exposure to theological resources (as was the case among the Mennonites during the first half of the nineteenth century in Russia), it is not difficult to see how such connotations might have emerged. The stronger emphasis on a definite conversion experience by the Mennonite Brethren movement in Russia did much to alleviate these notions, but when one talks to those who describe considerable pressure to be baptized, or when church leaders have encountered tenacious resistance when trying to remove "non-active" members from membership lists, one sometimes still wonders if all of the echoes of sacramentalism have faded entirely.

## Theological Meanings

The theological meanings that have been attached to baptism and church membership by the Mennonite Brethren will no doubt be given extensive coverage by others at this conference. I affirm Unger for his reminder that the issues surrounding the theological meanings of baptism and membership are fundamentally about how we understand the doctrine of the church.

The central theological meaning of baptism and church membership among both sixteenth-century Anabaptists, and Mennonites in Russia and North America has consistently been about incorporation into the community of faith. Baptism was seen as an outward sign recognizing the interior work of the Holy Spirit that was to be taken as a step of obedience to God. As a signal of rebirth, baptism served as an indication of an individual's willingness to follow the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and to live in obedience to God and the community of believers. The variety of sources cited by Unger illustrate well the language used to describe the nature of this incorporation: it not only signified a vertical mystical union with Christ, but also represented a horizontal covenant or a pledge made to fellow Christians. Membership was seen as an act of discipleship that signaled a willingness to be a part of, and to be accountable to, a covenant community of fellow believers. Because of the likelihood of persecution, it was not a decision to be made lightly. For leaders like Menno Simons, the desire to maintain the church community as holy, "without spot or wrinkle," led to a rigorous use of the ban as a form of discipline, and sometimes, as Unger notes, to a "spirit of legalism, perfectionism and division." Not all Anabaptists demanded adherence to such high ideals: a more moderate group of Anabaptists (e.g., Hans Denck and Pilgram Marpeck) understood membership as incorporation into a community of believers in which they might be nurtured, taught to overcome weakness, and grow in their obedience to Jesus Christ.

The desire to distance themselves from a church that they saw as decadent and corrupt, prompted the Mennonite Brethren in Russia to adopt the more rigorous "pure church" Anabaptist approach to church membership. Unique also was the insistence on the part of the Mennonite Brethren that candidates for baptism and church membership testify of a conversion experience that could be substantiated by a life of holiness and reconciled relationships. The "pure church" approach to membership served as a useful tool for defining and maintaining boundaries of cultural separation in North America.

In recent decades, a radically different approach towards baptism and church membership has appeared among the Mennonite Brethren in North America. In order to distance membership from the multiple associations surrounding it, some have disconnected baptism from membership within a local congregation, and have defined the meaning of membership simply as a signal of an individual's willingness to be identified with God's family of faith, that is, the "universal, invisible church." Explanations vary for why such an understanding of membership has made inroads among the Mennonite Brethren. Some suggest it is the influence of a docetic impulse within transdenominational evangelicalism that prioritizes a "spiritual" unity over commitment to denominational distinctives. Others suggest that it is a reflection of both North American individualism—salvation is a private matter between the individual and God thereby eroding the place of the local church, and consumerism—"customers" everywhere are characterized by waning loyalties and the demand for freedom to pick and choose their commitment. Still others offer a variety of pragmatic reasons, e.g., young adolescents being baptized are not ready for participation in local church decisions; and still others suggest it is a reaction to the dominance of non-theological dimensions of local church membership that seems to send inconsistent signals to new converts.



Most Mennonite Brethren churches still retain a connection between baptism and local church membership but with a somewhat different set of theological nuances: the harder edges of the pure church approach have softened somewhat, and instead of an emphasis on discipline and the ban, membership is talked about as an act in the process of discipleship that involves a covenant commitment to a local body of believers. Membership is characterized by mutual accountability, by receiving and extending grace and forgiveness, by cultivating the habits of Christian behavior and spiritual growth, by sharing financial gifts, and by the exercising of spiritual gifts for the edification of the church. The visible church is God's "hands and feet" in the world, the means whereby Christians witness to the world.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, how might this overview be used to contribute towards a constructive discussion of the issues that lie before us at this conference? (I recognize that I write as an historian and not as a pastor, and therefore do not feel the immediacy of this issue in my daily life in the same way as some of the pastors in our denomination.)

First, it is my hope that this overview might provide a taxonomy and vocabulary for identifying and differentiating between the many different strands of meaning wrapped together in the word "membership." As the different meanings of membership are identified with greater clarity and precision, it will become easier to determine which meanings we might want to retain, and from which we might want to separate ourselves. Clarity and precision in our language will also help us identify the common ground among those who disagree.

Second, I hope that Unger's paper will draw attention to the importance of fidelity to, and consistency within, a theological tradition. This is not the first time in the history of the Mennonite Brethren that practices and theological positions have been challenged. But as we work our way towards a solution to the questions that prompted this conference, I hope that consideration will be given to the relationship between any new proposals and the fundamental aspects of our Mennonite Brethren DNA, namely, that it is a movement defined by its intense Biblicism and its commitment to outreach. (These are not, of course, the only distinctive features of the Mennonite Brethren.)

Third, this overview draws attention to the role culture has played in the past in shaping the practices within our churches, and to the messages that our practices have sometimes sent to those whom we are trying to reach. Religious practices are always embedded within culture and derive at least part of their meaning from culture. My sense is that our response to the issues before us will be to begin with a search for agreement on our theological affirmations (as Unger's paper has done). This is appropriate, but one cannot simply extract one of the Biblical/theological strands of meaning as the preferred option without taking into account what it has meant socially, organizationally, and politically in the past, and without giving consideration to what it might mean socially, organizationally, and politically in a twenty-first century, North American context. Obtaining a consensus on our theological affirmations concerning baptism and membership is important, but will not be enough: a significant part of our discussion together will also need to be about how we implement or operationalize our theological affirmations within our congregations so that our practices in fact carry the intended meaning. Moreover, this overview should alert us to need to be aware of how our twenty-first century, North American culture is shaping our response to the issue under review.

## What Did/Does "Membership" Mean?

Time Period	Strands of Meaning					
	Political	Social	Organizational & Legal	Sacramental	Theological	
16th Century (Europe)	Separation of church and state	Care-giving community and friendship	A high-risk public identification with an illegal and persecuted group	Sacerdotal power transferred to the "true" Christian community	Incorporation into a community of believers committed to living lives characterized by suffering, holiness and purity as a witness to the world	
	Freedom of religion			Participation in the process of salvation	Incorporation into a community of believers in which they might be nurtured, taught to overcome weakness and grow in their obedience to Jesus Christ	
19th Century (Russia)	Formal identification with a group of people with specific privileges and limitations	Care-giving community and friendship	Membership lists and statistical record-keeping	Occasional hints of baptismal regeneration as some consider incorporation in local church as synonymous with universal, invisible church	Incorporation into a community of believers committed to living lives characterized by suffering, holiness and purity as a witness to the world	
		Identification with a particular German-speaking ethnic and religious group				
		Boundaries for friendship and marriage	The right to participate in decision-making			
		Rite of Passage into adulthood				
20th/21st Century (North America)	Identification as a member of a voluntary society with charitable status, and property tax exemptions	Identification with a particular German-speaking ethnic and religious group	The right to participate in decision-making	Occasional hints in the resistance to the removal of "non-active" members from membership lists	Incorporation into a community of believers committed to living lives characterized by holiness and purity as a witness to the world	
		Care-giving community and friendship	Conference "norms" and denominational budgets		Signal of an individual's identification with the universal, invisible church	
		Social status, elitism and exclusivity	Constitutions and legal responsibilities			
		Belonging to a group - sense of significance, identity and place	Revenue Canada requirements for charitable status		Record keeping and statistical analysis	An act in the process of discipleship that involves a covenant commitment to a local body of believers; this commitment involves mutual accountability, cultivating habits of Christian behavior, and the use of spiritual gifts