



# **ORDINATION**

**COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS**

# **AND A PROPOSAL**

**Board of Faith and Life**  
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**CANADIAN CONFERENCE**  
of Bishops

# ORDINATION: COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS AND A PROPOSAL

**M**ennonite Brethren have long used the practice of ordination to publicly recognize and call individuals for long-lasting ministry in church leadership roles. Although ordination is not explicitly taught or commanded in Scripture, it can be a God-honouring way of discerning and commissioning leaders. When ordination is practiced through the Holy Spirit's guidance, this practice can benefit both leaders and congregations. In response to recent questions being asked about ordination, the Board of Faith and Life (BFL) of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC) has developed the following proposal for re-engaging the practice of ordination.

## REVISITING ORDINATION

**D**uring recent decades, Canadian Mennonite Brethren (MB) have practiced ordination rarely. Now, however, Canadian Mennonite Brethren are again asking questions about ordination. These questions are being asked for many different reasons, including the following.

The increasing diversity (ethnic as well as theological) in the MB Conference is contributing to diverse understandings of ordination. Leaders—just as other believers—are moving from one denomination to another. Leaders with roots in other denominational and cultural contexts ask what MBs believe and practice concerning ordination.

Provincial conference credentialing bodies are regularly asked how they will honour the ordination of leaders from other denominations. Mennonite Brethren are engaged in many interdenominational partnerships, in which the matter of ordination is being raised.

Ordination language is used by the Canada Revenue Agency and other government agencies. This has caused confusion in both the meaning of ordination (e.g. is ordination primarily a professional certification?) and the motivation for seeking it (e.g. does CRA require ordination for the clergy residence deduction?).

In some MB contexts there is a real or perceived lack of affirmation of church leaders. In other MB contexts there is a real or perceived sense that church leaders have too much authority without accountability.

Leaders need ongoing reminders of their calling to serve the church.

Mennonite Brethren expect ordination to emerge from local congregations; but many local congregations are unaware of ordination, or of what it means and entails.

Some leaders, who could appropriately be ordained, serve primarily beyond their local congregations (e.g. missionaries, conference ministers, teachers and professors, transitional pastors).

An increasing number of leaders are requesting ordination, whether for service within congregations, or for service in the surrounding community (e.g. hospitals and prisons).

A central question that needs to be addressed is what is the best way today to practice the New Testament pattern of discerning and commissioning leaders? For instance, according to New Testament practice and teaching, those who belong to the church have an important role in selecting, affirming, and supporting individuals who have leadership roles in the church. Therefore, to be rooted in the New Testament, ordination must not simply be about the orientation of leaders to churches; it must also be about the commitment of churches toward leaders.

The following document seeks to address many of the questions surrounding ordination in four ways: by reviewing the history of ordination among Mennonite Brethren; by summarizing the New Testament teachings about “laying on of hands;” by identifying ways that those teachings can be implemented by Mennonite Brethren today; and finally by offering a proposal for renewing ordination among Canada’s Mennonite Brethren churches.

## HISTORY

Ordination has a long history among Mennonite Brethren. Early on, the denomination viewed ordination as a valid practice, rooted in the biblical teaching and practice of the early church. Ordination was considered to be synonymous with the “laying on of hands” (as seen, for example, in Acts 6:6). Repeatedly, conference resolutions assumed the continuing validity of ordination, and clarified the process and scope of its practice.

At the beginning of the Mennonite Brethren movement in 1860, Johann Claassen and Heinrich Huebert were ordained to give leadership within the new group. Ordination was an established practice among the MB house churches by the 1880s, when a conference resolution recommended that fasting be part of the ordination discernment process. When a denominational committee on city missions – effectively church planting – was created in 1907 both men and women were ordained to serve as city missions workers. Ordination was not only for pastors and deacons (1904), but also for evangelists and conference workers (1907), as well as missionaries (1919). Although ordinands included both paid workers and volunteers, the common thread in all these ordinations was a setting apart of leaders for a specified ministry role.

Mennonite Brethren have changed their posture towards people ordained in non-MB denominations. As late as 1943, MBs resolved not to recognize ordained leaders from non-MB denominations. However, conference delegates and churches found this conviction to be untenable. Therefore, in 1966, the General Conference passed a resolution from the Board of Reference and Counsel outlining a process for recognizing the ordination of pastors from other denominations who pledged themselves “to work in harmony and in cooperation with the ministering brethren [sic] of our Conference, and to uphold, promote and support wholeheartedly the total program of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches.”<sup>1</sup> A sectarian attitude in the context of ordination gave way to a process designed both to open the door for allowing new leadership into the denomination, while attempting to preserve theological identity and integrity.

Mennonite Brethren have long understood credentialing to be different from ordination. As an example of how credentialing differs from ordination, a 1957 resolution on ordination, commissioning, and licensing (which is today called credentialing) specifies that licensing distinguishes itself from ordination<sup>2</sup> in that it is only for a specific Christian work project and for a specified period of time.<sup>3</sup> It may be renewed or terminated at the discretion of the licensing body.<sup>4</sup> It authorizes a given person to preach the Gospel, baptize believers, admit members, administer the

<sup>1</sup> *We Recommend: Recommendations and Resolutions of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 308.

<sup>2</sup> *We Recommend*, 308

<sup>3</sup> *We Recommend*, 179.

<sup>4</sup> *We Recommend*, 309.

Lord’s Supper and footwashing, marry couples and officiate at funerals—but only within the confines of the specific Christian work project. In this way MBs made clear that there are ways of commissioning leaders for church ministry that are different from ordination.

In the mid-1900s, a series of problems arose that changed people’s understandings of ordination. These changes arose not directly out of the conference’s ordination practice itself, but rather via incremental changes in the denomination’s culture. The shift to full-time paid pastors, for instance, changed people’s view of ordained leaders. Ordained pastors rose to a prominence that set them apart from others in churches—set aside not only to a special role, but as a special class of believers. At times, pastors also assumed an authority that both belied teaching on the priesthood of believers, and gave pastors inordinate levels of control in churches. In addition, the fact that ordination was “for life” increased the perception that ordained people were a special class of Christians, superior to “average” believers. Also, ordination became limited to full-time pastors serving in preaching roles, was seen as conveying an authoritative teaching role, and was perceived as designating a higher class of Christians within the church. Appropriately, MB leaders reacted against this hierarchical view of ordained people.

These problems caused many MB churches and leaders to reexamine the witness of Scripture, and conclude that ordination does not accord with biblical teaching on the “laying on of hands” described in the New Testament. A 1972 resolution on ordination begins in this way: “ordination,

visibly expressed through the laying on of hands, is being questioned as a valid practice for today.”<sup>5</sup> With more and more leaders critiquing ordination as a human invention that diverged from the biblical model for discerning and commissioning leaders, the 1972 resolution on ordination states that the “biblical evidence does not answer the question about length or duration of the ordination. Ordination, while symbolizing authorization for the specific task, is an induction into service, not status.”<sup>6</sup> Various Mennonite Brethren leaders taught against ordination in order to restore a healthy emphasis on ministry participation by all believers and on the community’s role in discernment processes. One result of this teaching was that the MB practice of recognizing church leaders typically came to consist of installing and credentialing (incl. licensing). This is frequently now the only formal public recognition of giftedness and calling that pastors receive.

Although Mennonite Brethren have consistently emphasized discipleship in ways that mandate a high level of engagement in ministry service and discernment processes, churches have often had a poor understanding of how these accord with setting aside professional ministers whose sole occupation is the work of serving the church and its Gospel-centred mission.

<sup>5</sup> *We Recommend*, 309.

<sup>6</sup> *We Recommend*, 309.

## BIBLICAL TEACHINGS

The relationship between installation and credentialing-licensing on the one hand, and ordination on the other, needs to be tested in light of the New Testament practices of “laying on of hands.” Acts 6:6, Acts 13:3, 14:23, 1 Timothy 4:14, and 1 Timothy 5:22 suggest that for the first churches “laying on of hands” for leaders<sup>7</sup> included at least five dimensions:

1. recognizing a person’s suitability for church leadership (e.g. being full of the Spirit, having a good reputation),
2. carefully and prayerfully considering the leaders’ selection by the congregation and/or its leaders on behalf of the Holy Spirit,
3. appointing that person to a particular ministry task,
4. providing that person with appropriate authority and power for the task,
5. providing the Holy Spirit’s gifting.<sup>8</sup>

These five dimensions of “laying on of hands” can be appropriately summarized as discerning and commissioning. The first two dimensions point out the importance of discerning a leader’s suitability for church leadership. The next three dimensions consist of commissioning that leader for service in the church. In other New Testament scripture

<sup>7</sup> *The early believers also laid hands on people to bring about healing, and to initiate and incorporate people into the church.*

<sup>8</sup> *Paul may also have highlighted Timothy’s “laying on of hands” in order to validate Timothy’s leadership in the face of Timothy’s personal insecurity (2 Timothy 1:6).*

passages that speak about selecting leaders—passages where there is not mention of laying on hands—there is likewise a clear emphasis on both discerning and commissioning these leaders (cf. Acts 14:23, 2 Cor. 8:19, and Titus 1:5). The BFL is therefore committed to strengthening the discerning and commissioning processes used by MB churches.

## MB PRACTICES AND VALUES

In light of the New Testament’s witness, the BFL seeks to clarify the values and the practices that MB churches use when discerning leaders, and commissioning them for service. The following five discerning and commissioning practices in place among MBs need to be conducted in ways that accord with the Scriptures, as the following list indicates.

1. **Selecting.** In the case of congregational pastors, the practice of selecting or calling a leader is normally conducted largely by a search committee (or other body designated by the congregation and/or its leaders), and finalized by the congregation (or its designates). In many cases, this selection process includes elements that typify employment—for example, agreements about job descriptions, salary and benefits, terms of service, and evaluations. However, the most vital component of selecting all church leaders—including pastors—should be prayerful, careful discernment.
2. **Installing** (also called Commissioning). Installing or commissioning a leader typically includes the practice of laying hands on and praying for that church leader at the outset of their ministry in a particular role and context. This practice takes place within the congregation, and includes involvement by the congregation.
3. **Credentialing.** The practice of credentialing leaders is conducted by the leadership of the provincial MB conferences, on behalf of all the churches of that conference. This is primarily a practice of discerning a person’s suitability for leadership in the MB church, based on a wide-ranging

examination of that person's spiritual vitality, theological convictions, ethical character, and ministry skills. Elements of commissioning are often included at the conclusion of the credentialing process (e.g. blessing the successfully credentialed leader). The discerning function of credentialing is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but is ongoing, as demonstrated by the credentialed leaders' need to regularly demonstrate their compatibility with and support of the provincial MB conference.

4. **Licensing.** This is a legal authorization, by which leaders are given permission to officiate marriages within a particular province. MB leaders who have been credentialed may also be licensed within their province on the recommendation of that province's provincial MB conference (e.g. by that province's Board of Faith and Life). Although licensing was once understood to be synonymous with credentialing, it is now distinct from credentialing. Although the majority of credentialed leaders are also licensed immediately after being credentialed, this is not automatically the case (e.g. in the case of leaders whose ministry is not expected to include officiating at weddings). Licensing, although not a biblically-mandated practice, can be understood as part of commissioning a leader, because it equips that leader to fulfil a particular ministry role.

5. **Ordaining.** Ordination can provide a few additional features of discerning and commissioning that can benefit both leaders and congregations—in particular, highlighting a leader's substantive suitability for long-lasting ministry as recognized by the church through the Holy Spirit's guidance. Although ordination as Mennonite Brethren have used it is not explicitly taught or commanded in Scripture, it has served as a practice by which the church publicly recognizes and calls people for a long-lasting ministry in a church leadership role. The church recognizes these people's suitability for such ministry based on their character, reputation, and track-record. The church calls them in harmony with the witness of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the church practices selecting and credentialing to indicate that a person meets the minimum standards for MB church leadership, the church practices ordination to indicate and

establish the person's substantive and long-lasting suitability for that leadership ministry.

As these five definitions indicate, the five scriptural dimensions identified above (page 8) are included to varying degrees in the MB practices of selecting, installing, credentialing, licensing, and ordaining leaders.

The way in which these practices are implemented by MBs should always correspond to the values exemplified in Scripture. With respect to ordination in particular, here are several positive values which the BFL calls all MB churches to model, as well as negative pitfalls which the BFL calls churches to avoid.

### Positive values to emphasize:

1. Redefine ordination in light of biblical "laying on of hands."
  - Ordination is the discernment of a person's calling to a leadership ministry for the church; the duration of ordination is therefore open-ended.
  - Credentialing, on the other hand, is a complementary and preliminary step associated especially with discerning the theological compatibility of an individual for serving in this denomination.
2. Implement ordination in a way that recognizes the giftedness of individuals for specific leadership ministries.
  - The significance of ordination lies in the suitability of the individual for a particular ministry, and in the nature of the ministry to which the individual is called. Ordination's significance does not rest in the status of the person or in a specified duration of the ministry. (Note that although the individual's specific ministry roles may evolve over time, the leadership aspect of that individual's ministry is identifiable at the time of

ordination.) Ordination must therefore not create the kind of inappropriate hierarchy that cuts leaders off from fellowship with other believers.

3. Initiate ordination within the congregational community.
  - Churches choose to ordain people whose leadership gifts they recognize and validate.
  - Ordination is not something that individuals choose for themselves; it is the church community's role to initiate the process. The process is completed in partnership with the provincial MB conference.
4. Affirm and ratify ordination by the larger conference community.
  - In line with the historic MB conviction that conference discernment is the fullest expression of discernment in the life of the church,<sup>9</sup> the ordination process includes the participation of conference leaders who help discern the individual, and who publicly affirm the congregation's request to ordain the individual.
5. Recognize the appropriate authority delegated by the church community, while including suitable accountability in the process.
  - Ordination is usually long-term. However, while ordination is not limited to a term, neither is it automatically life-long. Ordination can come to an end for a variety of reasons (e.g., exit from ministry, moral failure).
  - Accountability to the congregation and denomination is built into ordination, in part through the regular process of reaffirming one's credentialing.

### Pitfalls to avoid:

1. Assuming that ordination confers power and authority that may be exercised unilaterally by ordained individuals.
2. Associating ordination with models of leadership that do not reflect Jesus' humble, servant-leadership.
3. Setting up ordained leaders as a special class of "super-spiritual" people, so that leaders are removed from relationships that would provide opportunities for mutual honesty, vulnerability, and even fallibility.
4. Misunderstanding ordination as an expression of rank, career advancement, or professional status.
5. Reducing ordination to the recognition of those in full-time employed pastoral positions.
6. Restricting ordination to a narrow a list of particular roles (e.g., preaching).

*9 MB practice has historically been that the more important a theological decision was, the larger the discernment conversation that informed it. This can be seen in the basic principle about biblical interpretation articulated by David Ewert: "One of the best ways to check our own pre-understandings of the Bible is to study it in the context of the Christian community, where our interpretations can be challenged, affirmed, or corrected" ("The Bible: Reading with Understanding," [BFL pamphlet, 2000]). Historical evidence of this reliance on conference discernment can be seen in the practice of decision-making through resolutions at annual conferences.*

*In the context of ordination, MB practice has long been to involve a larger discerning community in the form of leadership from surrounding MB churches (and in more recent years in the form of provincial committees). As early as 1933, a conference resolution exemplified this commitment by stating, "when a local church desires to ordain a brother [sic], it makes this desire known to representatives of the neighbouring M.B. churches for consideration" (We Recommend, 178).*



## PROPOSAL

In light of MB experiences currently and historically, in light of the New Testament's practice of "laying on of hands," and in light of the MB values of discernment and commissioning just outlined, the BFL calls the MB churches in Canada to re-engage with the practice of ordaining their pastors and other key leaders of the church, in keeping with the values described above.

In order to implement this process, the following steps are needed.

Credentialing and installing are to be prerequisites that can and regularly do lead to ordination after an appropriate term of ministry experience and communal discernment. In provincial conferences that practice both local (i.e. role- or congregation-specific) credentialing and provincial credentialing, ordination would follow provincial credentialing.

Ordination should be based on prayerful, spiritual discernment. It should neither be mandatory after credentialing and installation, nor an automatic procedure after a specified length of service.

For this reason, the discernment process for ordination should differ from the discernment within credentialing. The discernment about whether to ordain a leader should consist primarily of prayer and mutual listening, both to one another and to the Spirit. These two activities need to involve the congregation, the provincial conference, and the person being considered for ordination.

Ordination can be offered by a local congregation in partnership with its provincial conference to both paid and volunteer leaders, whether they are pastors, missionaries, chaplains, teachers, or servant-leaders of the church in other roles. This is in keeping with the pattern of past MB practice.

MB churches need teaching on this approach to ordination because ordination has fallen into disuse in many places; and because this proposal includes changes from past MB practices and understandings, and differs from the practices and understandings of some other denominations.

This proposal for re-engaging ordination as a regular practice among Mennonite Brethren has theological bases, as well as cultural implications. Ordination as it is here proposed would not only express MB convictions about ministry leadership, but would also, for instance, identify church leaders who are the face of the denomination in conversation with external agencies, governments, and the public. By exercising ordination in a biblical way, Canadian Mennonite Brethren would reengage a vital practice from their history, but do so in a fresh way that enhances their theological self-understanding and mission.

# SUGGESTED ORDINATION PROCESS

## Preamble:

Ordination will normally follow a period of service that will establish the candidate's call to ministry. A candidate will have served in a ministry capacity for a minimum of 3 years before ordination can be considered. The request for ordination needs to come to the provincial faith and life committee (or equivalent<sup>10</sup>) from the candidate's church, and needs to include the support of the senior pastor or the chair of the church's board. (In some cases, a provincial faith and life committee may approach and encourage a local congregation to initiate the ordination of a leader from that congregation—for example, in the case of a person who is providing leadership at a conference instead of congregational level.)

## Procedure:

1. A church leadership representative will provide a written request for ordination candidacy to the provincial faith and life committee (or equivalent), after which the church representative and the candidate will be advised of an interview date with the faith and life committee.
2. The senior pastor (or church board chair) will write a letter of support on behalf of the church for the candidate for ordination. Requests for ordination must come from an MB church where the candidate is presently ministering or is a member.

<sup>10</sup> Each provincial conference has its own faith and life committee (or equivalent) that is responsible for the credentialing, licensing, and ordaining procedures within that provincial conference.

3. The candidate will select 3 persons to fill out reference forms. The completed forms will be mailed to the faith and life committee.

4. The interview will involve the candidate, at least one representative of the church, and the provincial conference minister and/or executive director. The interview will review the candidate's ministry, assess the consistency of godly character, the evidence of a long-term call to ministry, and the level of support for ordaining the candidate from the church leadership. Prayer and prayerful listening will make up a substantial part of the interview session. Each interview will be about 1 1/2 hours.

5. The faith and life committee will require a minimum of 4 weeks from the time it receives all of the candidate's materials (including references) to the time of the interview.

6. Pending the outcome of the interview and a review to confirm the status of the candidate's ministry credentials, the faith and life committee will coordinate with the provincial conference office to schedule an ordination service in the candidate's home church. The committee and/or conference office will provide a representative who will participate in the church's ordination service.

7. Provincial faith and life committees (or equivalent) will have clear criteria for when to recognize the ordination of individuals who come into MB leadership from other denominations.

**T**he Board of Faith and Life (BFL) invites Mennonite Brethren (MB) provincial conference leaders, pastors, church leadership groups, and congregations to study this ordination proposal carefully. In particular, the BFL asks people to consider this proposal in light of Scripture; and in light of congregations' relationships and mission.

Below are three study questions to help in these considerations.

1. The language in the ordination proposal is framed as a "reengagement." In other words, it tries to rehabilitate a practice that was once common among Mennonite Brethren, but that fell into disuse during recent decades. Where do you see the proposal making positive corrective moves? Do you have concerns that remain, even in light of this proposal and its reengagement with ordination? Explain.

2. The proposal links ordination with commissioning—in order to practice discernment and blessing—and argues that publicly recognizing a minister's "substantive and long-lasting suitability" for leadership ministry is a good and mutually beneficial practice. The proposal makes the particular point that the "laying on of hands" passages in the Bible describe similar practices of discerning and blessing ministry leaders. In your view, how do commissioning and ordination practices add value to your experience of church? Do you see any downsides? Explain.

3. An extension of the proposal is an appeal to nurture and expand a culture of blessing in Mennonite Brethren churches today. Why do you think it is challenging to create, maintain, or foster a culture of blessing amongst congregations and their leaders? As well as commissioning and ordaining ministry leaders, how could churches discern, commission, and bless people with spiritual gifts other than ministry leadership? Explain.