

ORDINATION: PRINCIPLES & PRACTICE

Board of Faith and Life 2017



Canadian Conference
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

6. Pending the outcome of the discernment meeting and a review to confirm the status of the candidate's ministry credentials,¹⁷ the congregation will coordinate with the provincial conference office to schedule an ordination service in the candidate's home church. The conference office will provide at least one representative who will participate in the church's ordination service.¹⁸
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.
8. Ordination (and its associated credentialing and licensing) may end or be terminated¹⁹ for one of the following reasons:
 - a) the death of the individual;
 - b) the individual's exit from leadership ministry due to resignation, retirement, dismissal, or leaving the denomination;²⁰
 - c) the individual's commission of a moral²¹ and/or indictable²² offence that those ordaining see as disqualifying that person from ministry service.

¹⁷ The representative of the provincial faith and life committee will report on the outcome of the discernment meeting to the committee.

¹⁸ Resources to aid in planning an ordination service (e.g., Scriptures, vows, prayers, blessings, certificate) are available in *Following the Call: A Leadership Manual for Mennonite Brethren Churches* (edited by Doug Schulz and Michael Dick; Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1998), and/or from provincial conference ministers. When a person is ordained, they need to be given a certificate of ordination. A template for creating province-specific certificates is available from the national Board of Faith and Life.

¹⁹ Provinces will set their own policies to implement such processes.

²⁰ Ordination may cease for a person who exits a ministry role altogether. An individual who transitions to a ministry role in another denomination may request that body to recognize the person's ordination within the CCMBC.

²¹ As defined by the code of conduct signed by the individual as part of the provincial credentialing process.

²² As defined by the Criminal Code of Canada or another relevant legal statute.

Mennonite Brethren have long used 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 practised through the Holy Spirit's guidance, this process can benefit both leaders and congregations. In response to recent questions 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.

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What is Ordination?

Ordination is a practice by which a Christian community commissions men and women to the vocation of leadership ministry. Through this process, the Christian community recognizes a person's call to Christian ministry, and authorizes that person to serve as a leader—although ordination is not tied to one particular ministry role. Ordination follows a season of discernment by the community. For the sake of that discernment, the community invests time and energy building a strong relationship with the person, and reflecting prayerfully and theologically on that person's long-term suitability as a church leader. Ordination arises from the authority of the discerning community, and is intended to leave an enduring imprint on the ministry leader. However, the community can both ordain the person and withdraw that ordination where necessary. The ways we engage in ordination must always reflect the teachings and emphases of Scripture.

Revisiting Ordination – Why Now?

During recent decades, Canadian Mennonite Brethren (MB) have practised ordination rarely. Now, however, Canadian Mennonite Brethren are again asking questions about ordination. These questions are arising 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. Just as other believers are moving from one denomination to another, so too are leaders. Leaders with roots in other denominational and cultural contexts ask what MBs believe and practise 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.

Procedure:

1. Because discernment for ordination is rooted in the local congregation, a designated representative of an MB church will email (or mail) a request for ordination candidacy to the provincial faith and life committee (or equivalent). Requests for ordination must come from an MB church where the candidate is presently ministering or a member. Candidates for ordination must have been credentialed¹³ at least two years prior to this request.¹⁴
2. The senior pastor will write a letter on behalf of the church in support of ordaining the candidate. If the candidate is also the church's senior pastor, the letter will be written by the church board's chair.
3. The candidate will select three persons to fill out reference forms, which are to be sent to the faith and life committee.¹⁵
4. The faith and life committee will notify the church representative and ordination candidate once it has received all the above materials. The church should anticipate a minimum of four weeks from the time the committee receives all these materials until the discernment meeting.
5. The congregation's leaders will then invite two or three representatives from the provincial faith and life committee to join them for a discernment meeting with the ordination candidate.¹⁶ The committee's representatives will often include the provincial conference minister or executive director. This event will include listening, discernment, and prayer. (The congregation may also request further teaching and discussion about ordination.) The discernment meeting will review the candidate's ministry, assess the consistency of their godly character, the evidence of their long-term call to ministry, and the level of support from the church leadership for ordaining the candidate. Prayer and prayerful listening should make up a substantial part of the meeting. Each discernment meeting is about one-and-a-half hours.

¹³ Credentialing includes participating in Sacred Trust and Pastors Credentialing Orientation events.

¹⁴ Some provincial conferences require three to five years.

¹⁵ These forms are essentially the same as the ones used for credentialing.

¹⁶ If the candidate is married, it is preferable that their spouse participate in the discernment meeting because a couple's mutual support is a key ingredient in a leader's ministry effectiveness. Normally, however, ordination is for an individual, not a couple.

- 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.¹¹ 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 proposed above 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 conversations with external agencies, governments, and the public. By exercising ordination in a biblical way, Canadian Mennonite Brethren would re-engage a vital practice from their history, but do so in a fresh way that enhances their theological self-understanding and mission.

Ordination Process

Preamble

Ordination will normally follow a period of service that will confirm the candidate's call to ministry. A candidate will have served in a ministry capacity for a minimum of three years before ordination can be considered. The request for ordination needs to come to the provincial faith and life committee (or equivalent¹²) 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, or in the case of a church planter.)

¹¹ Employment is not a prerequisite for being ordained.

¹² 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.

- Leaders need ongoing reminders of their theological calling to serve the church. This calling goes far beyond the pragmatics of mere hiring, volunteering, or being recruited.
- Mennonite Brethren expect ordination to emerge from local congregations; but many local congregations are unaware of ordination, or of what it means and entails. Because many pastors are employees, it is tempting for churches to think of their pastoral leaders primarily in light of human resource issues.
- Churches who take ordination and a theology of church leadership seriously also need to think carefully about their own role in living out their corporate mission.
- 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).

We need to address this central question: What is the best way today to follow 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 five ways: by summarizing the New Testament teachings about “laying on of hands”; by articulating a theology of ordination that identifies its importance for the church as well as the ordinands; by reviewing the history of ordination among Mennonite Brethren; by identifying ways that biblical and theological teachings can be implemented by Mennonite Brethren today; and finally, by offering a proposal for renewing ordination among Canada's Mennonite Brethren churches.

Biblical Teachings Undergirding Ordination

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 occurrences of “laying on of hands.” Acts 6:6, Acts 13:3,

1 Timothy 4:14, 1 Timothy 5:22, and 2 Timothy 1:6 suggest that for the first churches “laying on of hands” for leaders¹ 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, and
5. providing a gift from the Holy Spirit.²

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

A Theology of Ordination

God has chosen to accomplish his redeeming purposes of love through human beings. These purposes have been accomplished above all through Jesus of Nazareth, the only begotten Son of God. So that the world might be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, God has instituted the church to make Christ and his gospel known in every place. For the church to fulfill that mandate, Christ has given the church wonderful gifts: leaders with diverse abilities and roles. The church’s practice of ordination recognizes and commissions these leaders to help the church mature into the full stature of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit working among all its members.

¹ The early believers also laid hands on people to bring about healing, and to initiate and incorporate people into the church.

² More study is needed to understand the association between the laying on of hands and the giving of a gift in 1 Timothy 4:14. Also, note that 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 1:6-7).

so that leaders are removed from relationships that would provide opportunities for mutual honesty, vulnerability, and even fallibility.

5. Misunderstanding ordination as an expression of rank, career advancement, or professional status.
6. Reducing ordination to the recognition of those in full-time employed pastoral positions.
7. Restricting ordination to a narrow list of particular roles (e.g., preaching).

Invitation to Re-engage Ordination

In light of recent questions, the New Testament’s practice of “laying on of hands,” theological considerations, and the MB experiences and 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 offer 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 praying and mutual listening to one another and the Spirit. These two activities need to involve the congregation, the provincial conference, and the person being considered for ordination (see details below).
- Ordination should be initiated by the congregation because of the desire to affirm the calling of the individual. Ordination is not something to be requested by an individual; it is not a professional certification to be pursued, but rather represents recognition and authorization by the church community.

of the church,⁹ 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 lifelong. 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.¹⁰

Pitfalls to avoid:

1. Assuming that ordination confers power and authority that may be exercised unilaterally by ordained individuals.
2. Assuming that weddings, funerals, baptisms, and communion services should only be conducted by ordained officiants.
3. Associating ordination with models of leadership that do not reflect Jesus' humble servant leadership.
4. Setting up ordained leaders as a special class of "super-spiritual" people,

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, it makes his desire known to representatives of the neighbouring M.B. churches for consideration" (*We Recommend*, 178).

¹⁰ This practice has already been implemented by some provincial conferences.

When we talk about ordination, it is important to remember that church leaders did not invent this practice arbitrarily. Nor is ordination an end in itself; it is a means to facilitate the reconciling mission of the church. Ordination is tied to biblical activities concerning the discernment and commissioning of leaders, and is connected to principles governing not only Christians' understanding of what leaders do, but also Christians' understanding of what the church community is and does. The church ought always to reflect its theological and missional priorities in its practices. This document about ordination is therefore intended to support a theology of leadership that is in line with what Mennonite Brethren say they believe about leaders and the church.

The New Testament descriptions of various types of leaders imply that church communities undertake a process to ensure that leaders meet the biblical qualifications for service in those roles. The early church recognized quickly that setting apart specific leaders for particular roles was necessary to ensure that needs did not go unmet (cf. Acts 6). Paul's letters remind believers that the Spirit gives different gifts for different types of service (1 Corinthians 12:1-30; Ephesians 4:1-16; cf. Romans 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Ordination represents a specific and visible commitment to recognizing God's role in equipping leaders for the work of the Kingdom.

On the other side of this is the role that the church community plays in mobilizing itself for ministry. Discipleship is not a spectator sport; and ordaining leaders is not a matter of hiring employees who will do the work of the church. Rather, ordination is about the discernment of leaders by a church community in a process of active discipleship. Church communities are to be centres of mission. Part of that mission is the discernment and mentoring of leaders who will assume roles in line with their gifting. For those who will be ordained, the time of proving which precedes ordination is one where mature disciples work alongside the individual and reflect on what they observe. Ordination of individuals to service in leadership roles reflects the church's desire to see ministry flourish. Ordination's intentionality is connected to discernment, leadership development, and a passionate engagement of the church community with her mission.

Although the organizational reality of current church practice can involve human resource policies and employment standards, churches ought not overlook the primary consideration of theological assessment in the discernment of leaders (whether they are serving in pastoral or other ministry roles). The church community is not called to make pragmatic decisions based on what seems to "work"; nor should the church allow cultural values to dictate its missional agenda. Rather, in the same way as a "city built on a hill cannot be hid" (Matthew 5:14), the church community should be conspicuous

in its commitment to its mission, and to the discernment of leaders using Kingdom values rather than lesser standards of leadership. Knowledge and skill are significant criteria for leadership, but the discernment of the community relies ultimately on the leading of the Spirit. The most knowledgeable or the most skilled person may or may not be the person God chooses. The local community's discernment for ordination needs to reflect this. Discernment, like authority, flows from the bottom up. That is why the local congregation is the starting place for this process.

Ordained leaders receive their authority and support from the community. Ordination is therefore also a visible commitment by the community to continue to support and nurture their leaders so that the work of the church may prosper. Unlike other organizations that may change leaders for political and transitory reasons, church communities that ordain a leader are making a commitment to honour what God has done—namely, by the Spirit raising up women and men to serve the church as leaders. For this reason, churches honour, encourage, and support their leaders, but also correct and hold them accountable when necessary. When ordination includes this kind of covenanted support of leaders, leaders and congregations both benefit over the long term.

Ordination represents not the recognition of a special kind of person, but the setting apart of a person for a special kind of service. Ordained leaders need to know that they are part of a supportive community in order to do their work joyfully (Hebrews 13:17). Although it is the congregation that initiates the process of ordaining a person, the community that ordains is larger than simply the single congregation. This is because MBs have long recognized that congregations are part of an essential whole beyond themselves; they are not isolated groups working independently. For this reason, input from beyond the congregation, usually from the provincial conference, is a part of ordination discernment. Furthermore, ordination is offered and recognized not only by the congregation, but also by its conference.³

The History of Ordination Among Mennonite Brethren

Ordination has a long history among Mennonite Brethren. Early on, the denomination viewed ordination as a valid custom, rooted in the biblical teaching and example of the early church. Ordination was considered

³ The conferences' role in recognizing people's ordination when they move between MB churches and between MB conferences echoes the New Testament practice of providing letters of recommendation to travelling leaders (cf. Acts 28:21; 1 Corinthians 16:3).

respect to ordination in particular, here are several positive values which the BFL calls all MB churches to model, followed by negative pitfalls which the BFL calls churches to avoid.

Positive values in practice:

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 nor in a specified duration of the ministry. (Note that although the individual's specific leadership role may evolve over time, the leadership aspect of that individual's ministry is identifiable at the time that the individual is ordained.)
 - 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 because each local congregation is accountable to a larger body.
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

Credentialing also identifies to government officials those who are accepted leaders within the provincial conference.

4. **Licensing.** This is a legal authorization granted by provincial governments by which leaders are given permission to officiate marriages within a particular province.⁸ 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 faith and life committee). 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 of a leader because it equips that leader to fulfill 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, a leader's substantive suitability for long-lasting ministry as recognized by the church through the Holy Spirit's guidance. Although the way Mennonite Brethren have used ordination is not explicitly taught or commanded in Scripture, ordination has given the MB church a means of living out its mandate to be a discerning community through publicly recognizing women and men for a long-lasting ministry in a leadership role. The church recognizes these people's suitability for such ministry based on their character, reputation, and track record. The church ordains them in harmony with the witness of the Holy Spirit. Whereas selecting and credentialing indicate that a person meets the basic standards for MB church leadership, the church practises 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 are included to varying degrees in the MB pattern of selecting, installing, credentialing, licensing, and ordaining leaders.

The way in which these practices are implemented by Mennonite Brethren should always correspond to the values exemplified in Scripture. With

⁸ Provincial governments and provincial MB conferences each have their own stipulations for who is permitted to officiate wedding ceremonies.

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 other 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.”⁴ 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 in that (1) it is only for a specific Christian work project and for a specified period of time. (2) It may be renewed or terminated at the discretion of the licensing body. (3) It authorizes a given person to preach the Gospel, baptize believers, admit members, administer the Lord's Supper and feet washing, marry

⁴ *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.

couples and officiate at funerals but only within the confines of said Christian work project.⁵

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 re-examine 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 (including licensing). This is frequently now the only formal public recognition of giftedness and calling that pastors receive.

⁵ *We Recommend*, 179.

⁶ *We Recommend*, 309.

⁷ *We Recommend*, 309.

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.

Ordination – MB Practices and Values

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

1. **Selecting.** The selection of a leader for a ministry position is, in the case of congregational pastors, normally carried out by a search committee, or other body designated by the congregation and/or its leaders. The congregation or its designates typically finalize the selection process. Although this process often includes elements that typify employment (e.g., job description, salary and benefits, terms of service, evaluations), the more vital element is discernment concerning the giftedness and theological compatibility of the individual for the ministry context. The process of selecting church leaders should above all be characterized by prayerful, careful discernment, in keeping with the New Testament's witness that the Holy Spirit's calling to minister comes through the church.
2. **Installing** (also called Commissioning). Installing or commissioning a leader typically includes laying hands on and praying for that church leader at the outset of their ministry in a particular role and context. This 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 an act 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.