

## **ONMB Bylaw Revisions: Understanding Membership in Church Bylaws**

The National Faith and Life Team has worked with the MB church family for over two years to update the MB Confession of Faith Article 8 on Christian Baptism. In the discussions, it became clear that some churches hold two different perspectives or have two categories of membership. For some churches, there is a legal corporate membership which may be different than theological covenant membership.

### **Legal Corporate Membership**

With the increased legislation related to non-profit corporations and charitable organizations, some churches have responded with stronger corporate governance where the power of a corporate member to vote at the annual general meeting and to approve the board of directors of the corporation has become a significant focus. In this situation, the corporation's governing documents (constitution, bylaws, letters patent, etc.) are written with a focus towards defining the legal members of the corporation. This legal definition of a corporate voting member relates specifically to requirements of corporate law. These legal definitions are not necessarily created to describe the Body of Christ.

### **Theological Covenant Membership**

The Confession of Faith commentary for Article 8 describes church membership as follows:

*"To be a member of the local covenant community is to share in the life and mission of the church, exercise one's spiritual gifts for the betterment of all, and provide and welcome mutual support and accountability."*

This is a description of a Christian as part of the Body of Christ, the Church. In this context, such an individual would adhere to the Confession of Faith and be accountable to the church for discipline. Theological Covenant Membership would enable someone to self-identify as being part of the MB family. By comparison, an adherent could be someone who simply attends the church and needs not self-identify as a Christian and would not consider themselves accountable to the church.

### **One Category of Membership**

Most MB churches in Canada have just one membership. The Article 8 commentary notes:

*The covenant members are also responsible to participate as they are able in the discernment and leadership of their local church, as well as in the larger MB church family at provincial and national levels.*

As described, the Theological Covenant Members are also the Legal Corporate Members. This single category approach provides the benefit of the unity of the body. It typically supports a style of polity where the covenant members have some level of voting privileges. (Note: the church bylaws will specify what matters are brought before membership for voting.)

### **Clarity of Membership in the MB Denomination**

For the MB Conferences in Ontario and in Canada, clarity is needed regarding individuals who are "members in good standing" within the church so that these individuals can participate within the MB Conferences. Also, the number of covenant members belonging to the church is used to establish the size of a church in determining the voting representation in the Conferences. Each local church is autonomous in its operations and so the church must clearly define its membership for the purposes of participating in the MB denomination.

If there are two classes of membership in the church's governing documents, the Ontario and Canadian Conference bylaws relate to the Theological Covenant Membership as defined in the Confession of Faith. If a church's bylaws do not describe the covenant membership, then the corporate membership would need to be used by default.