
ONMB Convention 2023



FROM THE PROVINCIAL FAITH & LIFE TEAM

Karen West, Ontario Rep. to NFLT

The Provincial Faith and Life Team (PFLT) is a standing committee of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (ONMB) board, as set forth in the ONMB General Operating Bylaw. Its authority and mandate is to:

(1) Initiate, study and recommend any matters of faith and life related to the issues of ministry and church life in the Ontario Conference or to the relationship of the Ontario Conference to broader issues in society at large.

(2) Maintain the centrality of the Confession of Faith and interpret and apply it to all Ontario Conference ministries and programs in a manner consistent with interpretations and practices of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and the National Faith and Life Team.

(3) Administer the processes for both credentialing and de-credentialing individuals for Christian ministry who serve the Member Churches of the Ontario Conference, or who serve in other similar leadership and spiritual functions.

4) Maintain the registry with the Ontario office regarding the licensed ministers of the Ontario Conference.

(5) Give guidance to Member Churches, Associate Churches, and any other organizations using the Confession of Faith in matters of faith and doctrine.

(6) Appoint one of its committee members to serve on the National Faith and Life Team of the Canadian Conference.

(7) Assist the Board in discerning new congregations applying for membership in the Ontario Conference.

(8) Assist the Board in matters of the suspension, revocation or reinstatement of a Member Church.

(9) Interview individuals to determine their standing as described in the bylaw.

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Through these mandated roles, the FLT participates in and collaborates with the National Faith and Life Team (NFLT) to articulate and safeguard Mennonite Brethren theological convictions, and provides discernment and guidance on contemporary issues within the Province of Ontario. This task is accomplished primarily through sustaining our MB confessional foundation, guiding and supporting churches and their leaders, and facilitating the credentialing process for church and ministry leaders.

The PFLT is accountable to the ONMB board, and by extension to the ONMB conference of churches, with the ONMB board appointing the team members as well as the chair. Each Provincial Faith and Life Team across Canada has a direct relationship to the National Faith and Life Team by appointing one team member as a representative to serve on the NFLT, and to ensure national and provincial coordination and collaboration on Faith and Life Team matters.

During this past fiscal year, our Ontario PFLT officially met four times in June, October, December 2022 and January 2023, through a combination of zoom and in-person meetings, with additional meetings for credentialing interviews, meetings with various church leaders, and preparatory work.

During this last fiscal year, the following people served as members of PFLT, all of whom are credentialed pastors/leaders within our MB churches:

The PFLT members are:

- Richard Martens (as chair)
- Dave Fowler
- Jeff MacLeod (previous ONMB Board Chair)
- Mandy Kasper (until October)
- Matt Unruh
- Chris Walker
- Karen West (Ontario Rep to NFLT)
- Michelle Knowles (current ONMB Board Chair)

Ed Willms also served on PFLT as ex-officio staff, with Ryan Jantzi continuing in that role as Interim Executive Director, along with Kristi Lee. Thank you to Bill Stubbs, who serves our PFLT by tracking all our marriage licensing. A special thank you to Richard Martens for his excellent leadership as PFLT chair for many years! Pursuant to our Bylaw, the next chair will be appointed by the ONMB Board after this convention.

One of the major PFLT roles is ensuring that our pastors and ministry leaders are credentialed, in order to maintain the centrality of our MB Confession of Faith in the context of ministry leadership and practice, and to ensure that our pastors and leaders in our ONMB family are ethically able and supported in their ministry roles.

The credentialing process includes:

- Completing the national Ministry Credentialing Questionnaire or Mentor-Based Credentialing Process
- Reading and reporting on two historical MB books
- Being interviewed by two members of the PFLT
- Reference checks
- Prayerful discernment and vote by the PFLT as a whole
- Signing the MB Code of Personal and Ministry Ethics
- Attending the National Pastor's Credentialing Orientation (PCO).
- Note: This credentialing process is expected to occur within the first year of a new pastoral assignment, with PCO to be completed within two years of credentialing.

2022 Credentialing Updates:

- 5 Ministry Leaders Credentialed
 - Mike Brnjas (WMB); Mitch Hunter (North-end); Derek Klumpenhauer (WMB); Michael Reimer (Cornerstone); Alex Smethurst (Mountain Park)
 - Additionally, Shawn Branton (WMB) shifted from local to provincial credentials

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- 4 Credentials Removed Due to Resignations/Withdrawals from ONMB
- We anticipate credentialing 5-10 additional pastors in 2023.

This past year our PFLT engaged in various topics and circumstances:

- Ways to keep confessional integrity with the MB Confession of Faith and our communal interpretation of scripture as captured therein, given other views. While the whole of the confession is included in this work overall, a particular topic has surfaced due to cultural views and practices which are contrary to the MB confessional belief that scripture defines marriage as being between one man and one woman. Your PFLT joins our churches in ensuring that we live and model that confessional integrity, while still demonstrating Christ's love and grace to those who either view this differently, or who question how to practically merge faith and life on this topic. The seminar "Posture Shift", hosted by ONMB in March 2022, along with the NFLT's document, "LGB Loving Well", continue to be helpful resources.

- Processing with the leadership in two of our churches regarding their belief and subsequent choice of a different path from that as set out in our MB Confession (resulting in the formalized suspension of church membership within our conference for both Southridge Community Church and FreeChurch Toronto). This convention 2023 includes a deciding vote by the delegates to either affirm or reject the recommendation of the ONMB board and PFLT to release and bless these two churches as they pursue a different understanding and belief regarding marriage.

- Processing the withdrawal of New Hope Church Niagara from membership with ONMB in February 2022.

- Providing input and feedback to NFLT regarding work on collaborative national documents, particularly from an Ontario perspective. These are typically documents that all provincial MB conferences seek to hold in unity across Canada, and to implement together as one denomination, but with many different geographical and cultural settings. In 2022, this work primarily included feedback and implementation of the Collaborative National Credential Policy, the Code of Personal and Ministry Ethics, and ongoing review of Confession of Faith wording.

Your Ontario PFLT appreciates your prayers, and is open to your feedback, comments and questions.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we live in a broken world, with broken lives, and often in broken circumstances. Churches deal with these realities of "faith" and "life" all the time. It's where the "rubber hits the road" in the lives of those who gather every Sunday, and those who don't know Jesus... yet. The fact is, life can be challenging, and yet, through our obedience to his ways, Jesus calls and enables us—His Church—to individually and collectively witness his presence in our lives, so that others might also know him as Saviour. Our troubles may at times feel overwhelming, but the Holy Spirit empowers us, nonetheless, to live in the light of the greatest love the world has ever known. In our brokenness, Jesus shines, leading us through turbulence, so that others may see and know the reason for our faith! This is what "Faith" and "Life" is all about. It's the reason we serve! To this end, we pray.



Karen West

Ontario Provincial Faith and Life
Rep to NFLT, for the PFLT

February 8, 2023

Greetings,

We are looking forward to gathering as the ONMB community for our 2023 Convention at Maple View Mennonite Church in Wellesley, ON. This will be our first in-person convention in three years!

This year's convention will include important decisions related to the identity and future of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. It is our desire that our ONMB members be well informed in preparation. Two motions being brought by the ONMB Board are related to the ending of ONMB affiliation for FreeChurch Toronto and Southridge Community Church (SCC). FreeChurch and SCC were placed on "membership suspension" on October 14, 2022 and November 5, 2022 respectively. These recommendations to end their ONMB affiliation are coming to you, the delegates, after much dialogue, interaction, process, prayer, and discernment by both the ONMB Board and Faith & Life (PFLT) over the last four years.

Background Related to the Proposed Action

1. **We share a deep concern for how we can grow in love and invitation for 2SLGBTQ+ persons—but believe that this is best done by a careful exploration of the way of Jesus and the ethical expectations articulated in Scripture for disciples of Jesus.** Jesus' ethical expectations are always in the direction of true life—even when they are profoundly challenging and difficult. These ethical expectations (which reflect the historic, biblical, and orthodox understandings held by Christians for the past 2000 years) are summarized well in Articles 10 and 11 of the MB Confession of Faith — and describe what Mennonite Brethren believe are God's very best and loving intentions for people, creation, and the world.

As such, the MB Confession of Faith is both an invitation and a discipleship tool for all who desire to journey through life in submission to Christ, and in obedience to his ways, regardless of one's self-identity. This includes those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ persons, who wish to join the MB family as we all submit to Christ.

We believe that Articles 10 and 11 faithfully describe the way of Jesus in terms of sexuality and sexual expression, but we need to grow in our posture of love and invitation especially to those who have been excluded and marginalized. We have much to learn and feel that our Posture Shift event in March, where we learned from believers who experience same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria, was a significant step in this direction. Our Board and Faith & Life Team are committed to continuing this journey of growth. We acknowledge our need to continue to learn more about embodying a posture of invitation, compassion, and love for 2SLGBTQ+ persons both outside and inside our church families.

2. **We believe that clarity in the ethical issue of sexuality really matters because it is a theological and a hermeneutical question that is about much more than simply sexual behaviours.** It has larger implications for how we understand the nature of Christian discipleship, the authority of Scripture, the nature of the gospel, and so on. For this reason, we do not see sexual ethics as a standalone issue, but one integral to the overall framework of how we use Scripture. And thus, as part of a larger theological and hermeneutical perspective, we affirm the view on sexuality expressed in our Confession of Faith.

While some declare that our historic understanding of sexual intimacy for Christians as limited to male/female marriage is really a disputable or secondary theological matter, the Faith & Life Team and ONMB Board believe it is critical to hold fast to our existing convictions. Our ethics cannot be distanced in significance from doctrine. Our Anabaptist forebears insisted that 'to have faith is to follow' and thus our ethical decisions are of

critical importance. We believe that the biblical teaching on the subject of sexuality, as historically understood and articulated in the MB Confession of Faith, is strong and biblically defensible. We believe that when our hermeneutical approach, our posture toward Scripture, and our understanding of God's expectations for Christian disciples are all shifted to allow for differing views on sexual ethics, many of our other faith commitments are also dramatically and negatively affected.

3. **ONMB is part of a larger church family (national and international) who share mutual commitments around theological and ethical matters like this.** If we were to ignore our commitment to this larger church family, it would have a ripple effect—both nationally and internationally.

ONMB churches are part of a national (CCMBC) and global (ICOMB) MB community. The covenantal relationship with these partners is based on shared theological/ethical convictions, relationships, and mission. Divergence from sexual ethics expressed in the Confession of Faith would violate our existing commitments both relationally and organizationally with the broader MB community.

This issue and all theological issues need to be discerned via a community hermeneutic with our national and global partners, rather than prematurely stepping beyond as a local or regional MB community. The National Faith and Life Team has been and will continue to lead us in discerning these matters with regional and global MB communities.

4. **All ONMB churches enter the ONMB family on the basis of their commitment to operate in agreement with the MB Confession of Faith and practices.** If a church moves away from and violates this fundamental commitment, it must recognize that this necessarily puts at risk their affiliation with the larger church family.

The existing organizational structure and polity require that all ONMB churches and pastors affirm and comply with the Confession of Faith in its entirety, as seen in the bylaws of the Conference:

1.2.18 "Member Church" means a local Christian church in Ontario which is organized according to Mennonite Brethren polity, as described in this Bylaw, and which is in agreement with the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith and practices, and has been accepted into membership as provided for in Section 6.4, and which desires to support the work of the Ontario Conference.

6.1.1 Member Church Requirements

▪The Ontario Conference may grant membership to any church which professes the same faith as that of the Ontario Conference, accepts its resolutions, Confession of Faith, values and mission, understands the responsibilities and expectations of membership, and participates in its common undertakings.

(Please see the bylaws related to the suspension and revocation of member churches, included in Appendix A. The Collaborative National Credentialing Policy also indicates the expectation that all credentialed pastors fully embrace the MB Confession of Faith.)

Present Situation and Proposed Action

1. **SCC and FreeChurch have each publicly expressed their decision to move away from our shared biblical understanding that for disciples of Jesus, sexual intimacy is necessarily limited to the context of a male/female marriage covenant (as described in Articles 10 and 11 of the MB Confession**

of Faith). By doing this, both congregations are moving away from and violating their ONMB affiliation covenant to operate in agreement with the MB Confession of Faith and practices.

FreeChurch via their website and their “Living Document” indicate a commitment to full inclusion of all 2SLGBTQ+ persons including those who are in or seeking same-sex marriages. FreeChurch’s Living Document expresses that FreeChurch values marriage as a life-long exclusive relationship. They are inviting same-sex couples and male/female couples to this same expectation. The Living Document recognizes human sexuality as an important matter for Christian ethics, proposes that Christians can faithfully disagree on the issue of same-sex marriage, and expresses the desire to pursue unity despite theological differences.

SCC publicly communicated the intention in Fall 2022, to expand its capacity for ‘Love Beyond Belief’, especially as it relates to the inclusion of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. The intention of SCC is to move into a model of full inclusion for 2SLGBTQ+ persons and make the discipleship expectation of sexual intimacy limited to male/female marriage a “disputable matter” and not a requirement for participation and leadership in their church. While SCC has not become a “fully affirming” church as a formal position, it has expressed the desire to create space for divergent views and practices within their church family—even for those in leadership.

2. ONMB has had a three-plus year journey of extensive conversations with SCC and FreeChurch about these decisions and the implications for their participation within the ONMB family but both congregations have decided to continue with the path that they have chosen. ONMB has discerned that in both cases, their plans are in fundamental conflict with our MB Confession of Faith which is why this decision is being brought to the ONMB Convention. Here are a few of the steps in the process:

- ONMB has sent staff, board members, and Faith & Life Team members to dialogue with leaders of both churches at various points.
- A listening event organized by the ONMB Board was held in September 2022 with the intent of ONMB pastors learning about the journey of these churches related to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion.
- In terms of SCC, ONMB has previously published public communication pieces relaying the dialogue with SCC including December 2019 which stated their view at that time, “SCC is seeking to find ways to include and disciple 2SLGBTQ+ people in their church community by creating open and safe environments for them, while also upholding the Confession of Faith” and “SCC intends to clearly teach and uphold this position within their congregation.”

Finding ways to reach out to those who refer to themselves as 2SLGBTQ+ people is, and should be, part of our collective vision as Mennonite Brethren, just as it is our vision to reach out to all people from every sphere of life. However, through significant dialogue and interaction with SCC leadership over the past three plus years, the ONMB Board and PFLT came to understand that SCC’s vision is to be inclusive, not just of people with varying sexual perspectives and practices, but also to be inclusive of differing theological beliefs and biblical interpretations on these questions. The MB Confession of Faith on sexuality would thus be considered a disputable matter, with people of differing views and practices being welcomed into leadership and decision-making roles. It took time to get to the heart of this matter, and to realize that SCC is on a different path from the MB vision to first invite everyone to Jesus regardless of their situation, but also to disciple all people towards what we believe is God’s very best plan for faith and life as articulated in Scripture.



Much hard work has been invested in understanding one another with the hope of finding a mutually satisfactory, redemptive outcome. Much of the dialogue has been in closed circles due to the private nature of the topic at hand, but aimed to be public and transparent where possible, as the discernment conversations have taken place over multiple years.

3. It is for these reasons that ONMB is proposing the ending of SCC and FreeChurch's affiliations with the ONMB Conference.

It is with sorrow and loss that we recommend the revocation of membership from the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches for FreeChurch Toronto and Southridge Community Church. The ONMB Board does not view this motion to our delegates as a removal of a church from membership—but rather as an action to formally recognize what FreeChurch Toronto and Southridge Community Church have already done by their actions of knowingly departing from their ONMB affiliation expectations.

While we value our shared church affiliation across our provincial and national MB conferences (and we grieve this loss within our church family), there are times when maintaining affiliation puts at risk the well-being, integrity, public witness, and missional purpose of the local MB church, ONMB and our larger Canadian Conference of MB Churches. It is therefore important to have clarity about the process of and the rationale for this motion to end their ONMB affiliation.

The passing of this motion will remove all formal and informal standing of FreeChurch and SCC in their relationships with ONMB and CCMBC. Our partner agencies (Multiply, Camp Crossroads, etc.), who also are committed to uphold the MB Confession of Faith, will each need to discern the nature of their relationship to these churches in the future.

The Future Relationship of SCC and FreeChurch with the ONMB Conference.

Should these churches be released from membership, our ONMB conference will relate to them in the same ways as we would relate to any other non-MB church. Even though the passing of this motion will end formal affiliation, we will continue to be united as brothers and sisters in the broader body of believers and we anticipate opportunities to connect and serve together.

We acknowledge the valuable gifts and inspiration they have brought to the ONMB family. We would love to see these churches return to our shared commitments and convictions as Mennonite Brethren, and continue to be significant contributors to, and extensions of the shared ministry of ONMB. At any time, they are welcome to reapply for affiliation with the ONMB Conference if they can commit to living according to our shared ONMB affiliation expectations.

Praying that the Holy Spirit will guide the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in this matter. On behalf of the ONMB Board, Staff, and the Faith & Life Team,

Michelle Knowles, ONMB Board Chair
Ryan Jantzi, Interim Executive Director

Appendix A

Excerpt from the General Operating Bylaw (220226) of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches

- **6.8 Suspension or Revocation of Membership of a Member Church**
 - **6.8.1 Investigation**
 - The Board shall begin investigation of any Member Church that, in the opinion of the Board, fails to adhere to the polity as described in this Bylaw or the bylaws of the Canadian Conference, or fails to adhere to the Confession of Faith, such that it could create undue risk spiritually or financially or legally, or in any other manner that damages the unity, purpose and mission of the Ontario Conference. The desired outcome, where possible, is for any such issues to be rectified in order for the Member Church to remain in good standing with the Ontario Conference.
 - **6.8.2 Suspension Procedure**
 - In the case where an investigation, as set out in 6.8.1 reveals unresolvable issues, the Board's investigation, in consultation with the Provincial Faith & Life Team, shall be done in good faith in a fair and reasonable manner, including:
 - A written notice will be sent to the Member Church of the proposed discipline, including the reason for such proposed suspension at least fifteen (15) days before the suspension begins; and
 - The Member Church will be given a further, reasonable opportunity to make representations to the Ontario Conference respecting the proposed discipline not less than five (5) days before the suspension begins.
 - Upon a resolution of the Board, a Member Church that is suspended is considered to be in "not good standing" with the Ontario Conference as well as with the Canadian Conference. The membership rights, as described in Section 6.2.1, of a suspended Member Church are suspended until resolved as described in either section 6.8.3 or 6.10.
 - **6.8.3 Revocation Procedure**
 - After suspension as described in Section 6.8.2, a Member Church's membership in the Ontario Conference can be terminated:
 - After a careful examination of the circumstances by the Provincial Faith and Life Team; and
 - Upon the recommendation of the Board; and
 - Through a Special Resolution passed by the Members.
 - Termination of church membership in the Ontario Conference also terminates membership in the Canadian Conference.
 - **6.9 Termination of Membership of a Member Church**
 - Unless granted special dispensation in a resolution passed by the Board, membership in the Ontario Conference automatically terminates, without a period of investigation or suspension, upon the happening of any of the following events:
 - 6.9.1 upon presentation by a Member Church to the Board of a true copy of a resolution to that effect passed by not less than two-thirds (2/3) of its church membership at a meeting of the Member Church duly called for that purpose;
 - 6.9.2 if a Member Church joins another denomination;
 - 6.9.3 upon the passing of a Special Resolution passed by the Members, as set out in 6.8.3;
 - 6.9.4 upon closing or dissolution of the Member Church;
 - 6.9.5 upon revocation or loss of charitable status as granted by the Canada Revenue Agency; or
 - 6.9.6 upon revocation or loss of the legal registration under which the church was formed.
 - Termination of membership in the Ontario Conference also terminates membership in the Canadian Conference.
 - **6.10 Reintegration of a Member Church**
 - 6.10.1 Any membership that has been suspended as described in Section 6.8.2 can be reinstated by a resolution of the Board upon the Board's satisfaction that the concerns have been adequately rectified.
 - 6.10.2 Any membership that has been terminated as described in Section 6.8.3 can be reinstated after completing the membership application procedures as described in Section 6.4.