ONTARIO CONFERENCE OF MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES

CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES

ONMB's Church Membership and Review Policy

Preamble:

The following policy was created by the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC) National Faith and Life Team (NFLT). It has been agreed to be all the six provincial MB conference offices (BCMB, ABMB, SKMB, MBCM, ONMB, and AEFMQ). It is an attempt to clarify the mutual obligations that exist between each local MB church and the other MB churches in its province as represented by their provincial conference office. The policy also seeks to clarify the appropriate process steps in response to significant failures in these obligations.

Key Definitions:

Canadian MB Church: The larger collective entity of all local MB churches who have membership within their provincial MB conferences. The Canadian MB Church views itself as far more than a denomination, institution, legal entity, or social club—and more than a "collective," "coalition," or "network" of churches. Individual disciples of Jesus join local MB congregations and become "members" of those local churches. This is not simply a "business membership" with costs and benefits, however, but the entering into of a deeper "covenant-like" or "family-like" relationship. This relationship of mutual obligation, care, and accountability assumes that members in the local church have a shared experience of salvation, and a shared willingness to embrace the church's history, the church's theological/ethical convictions around discipleship, and the church's mission. The relationship dynamic between the local church and each member is then extended to the relationships between each local MB church and the other MB churches through their provincial MB conference, and then from there to our Canadian MB conference across the country, and finally to our ICOMB churches around the world.

Canadian MB Church "Family": From their very beginning, Mennonite Brethren have used family language to describe the type of relationships that should exist between believers in the local church and between MB churches far and near. This understanding of church as family is based on the New Testament pattern. Jesus called all those who do the will of God his "brother and sister and mother," turning strangers into family (Matt 12:49-50). Disciples of Jesus with no biological connections are now inter-connected "children of God" (John 1:12-13) and "members of the household [family] of God" (Eph 2:19). The New Testament often refers to local believers (unrelated by physical birth) as "brothers and sisters" (e.g., Acts 6:3; 7:2; 11:29; Rom 1:13; 7:4; 1 Cor 1:10). The expression "brothers and sisters" becomes essentially a synonym for anyone who is a disciple of Jesus in any location: "All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings" (1 Cor 16:20). "Brother" and "sister" are family terms that carry overtones of endearment, care, loyalty, accountability, and long-term mutual obligation (1 John 3:11-24), seeking the ultimate well-being of the other.

Provincial MB Conference: This is the collective entity of local MB churches who have agreed to mutual membership obligations within their provincial MB conference. Provincial MB conferences participate together in the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC) by agreeing to the CCMBC Member

Organization Agreement (MOA). This mutual agreement involves an ongoing willingness to support shared theological convictions as expressed in the MB Confession of Faith, while participating in a shared mission by means of a shared strategic plan (viz., the Collaborative Unified Strategic Plan and the Collective Impact Strategy).

Local MB Church: While local MB churches may have different polity and governance structures within the parameters of their provincial MB conference bylaws, for the purposes of this policy, those individuals who have decision-making authority within the local MB church will be considered to be addressed by this policy. The collective expression "local MB church" is a reference to all the "members" and recognized "leaders" from that local congregation who set the theological, ethical, and missional direction for that local body.

Purpose of Policy:

This policy attempts to articulate steps to renew and restore healthy relationships between a local MB church and its provincial/national church family when these are threatened. It also acknowledges that sometimes, as a last resort in the accountability process—if all these reconciliation steps fail—separation may be the only peaceful option left to us (even as we grieve that separation knowing that it is less than God's ideal for family).

While it may not appear that separation can coexist with our theological understanding of family, there are examples of God separating himself from Israel, his "first-born son" (cf. Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1) by means of exile (cf. Jer 3:8). But this separation involved a constant invitation to return (cf. Jer 3:12). The loving father in Jesus' parable allows his son to separate from him but extends a lavish restoration when his son returns (Luke 15:11-24). The "family-like" relationship of the disciples with Jesus did not mean that Jesus was unwilling to recognize the reality of disciples walking away from that relationship (cf. John 6:60-70)—or that churches should not do the same with believers who walk away (cf. Matt 18).

Using the language of "family" to describe the relationship of disciples to each other within the local church—and to all others within our MB family provincially, nationally, and internationally (and with all other disciples of Jesus around the world)—does not mean that mutual accountability and possible separation are ruled out. Being a "Peace Church" committed to reconciliation and love of enemies does not rule out accountability structures and the possibility of separation. However, our goal is reconciliation and thus our procedures should always have both love and truth shining forth in the midst of mutually respectful conversations. The following policy is crafted with those values and aspirations in view.

CCMBC Core Values that Undergird our Mutual Relationships (From CCMBC)

- **We operate in dependence on God**, who is revealed to us most clearly in Jesus. The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Jesus, gifts, energizes and leads His people. We therefore live in prayerful and obedient attentiveness to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- **We live by the guidance of Scripture**. Because of the Scripture's unique authority, we seek to understand it and live it out faithfully. The MB Confession of Faith describes our current convictions. Jesus, God's Word to humanity, is the lens through which we read the Bible. We count on the Holy Spirit to guide our shared interpretations.

- **We expect transformational discipleship.** Because Jesus is Lord and calls all people to be His disciples, we strive to follow Jesus with all we are and have – will, mind, emotions, actions, possessions, and relationships. Because the Holy Spirit transforms Jesus' followers, we encourage each other to grow in Christlikeness, and invite others to become Christ's followers.
- **We participate in God's mission.** God has called and sent His people, just as God sent Jesus. Therefore, as we go to all peoples near and far, we go with word and deed—proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation and doing the work of peace.
- **We are church-focused.** Local churches, as expressions of Christ's body, are to announce and demonstrate God's Kingdom, and are central to God's work in the world. Therefore, all national and provincial initiatives must equip and serve local churches.
- **We serve and lead together.** Jesus calls His followers to learn, discern, obey, and serve together. We therefore value hearing each other, serving together, deferring to one another, and reconciling our relationships. These processes take place in and across local, provincial, and national contexts. We invite women and men of our churches to lead collaboratively at all three levels, and count on them to nurture interdependent relationships with each other and with those they serve. Recognizing the diversity within our larger denominational family, we call all to our central identity, mission, ethic, and theological convictions as described in the MB Confession of Faith and other MB documents and resolutions.
- **We steward resources on God's behalf.** Ever since the creation of the universe, God has given good gifts to humanity and has authorized humans to tend these gifts as His resource managers. As stewards we therefore serve the MB churches and ministries in Canada responsibly and competently, exercising care and integrity as we oversee the funds and all other assets entrusted to the church for its ministries. We expect all who oversee the church's resources to demonstrate accountability and transparency.

Local ONMB Church Obligations to its ONMB Family

1. **Affirming and Supporting the National MB Family's Theological DNA**. The MB sense of family at one time was about shared theological and missional commitments bolstered significantly by shared historical, cultural, ethnic, and biological ties. But today our family identity is far more dependent on our shared commitment to what we believe is a unique theological DNA. This theological vision, as described in the "Introduction to the MB Confession of Faith (2023)," produces a particular identity (viz., missiology, ecclesiology, and ethical vision). We welcome local congregations who desire to share these theological convictions along with the practical ethical, ecclesiological, and missional life that results from these convictions. Existing churches and new church plants are welcomed into the MB family on this basis alone.

   Affirming and supporting the national MB conference's theological DNA means that the local church recognizes the authority of the larger national MB conference to define this theological DNA and articulate what local MB church affirmation and support looks like. For a description of how the MB Confession of Faith should function as a unifying set of convictions, see the "Introduction to the MB Confession of Faith (2023)."

2. **Active Participation in the ONMB Conference.** Churches that affirm and support the national MB conference's theological DNA demonstrate this by active participation in the ONMB conference. The local MB church displays its commitment by:
   - teaching and upholding the MB Confession of Faith

- actively supporting the mission of ONMB and CCMBC
- ongoing signing and affirming the ONMB membership covenant
- ensuring that the church's constitution and bylaws are in alignment with ONMB's General Operating Bylaws
- following ONMB guidelines related to the hiring of appropriately credentialed pastors/leaders
- embracing and promoting shared initiatives
- financially supporting ONMB operations and its related agencies
- participating in ONMB and CCMBC events/conventions
- accepting and participating in structures of mutual accountability
- praying for other MB churches and leaders in ON and across Canada.

ONMB and CCMBC Conference Obligations to Local ONMB Churches

By membership with ONMB and CCMBC, local ONMB churches receive assistance with:

- **Family Care** (e.g., prayer support, assistance, and encouragement for leaders and congregations facing difficult circumstances).
- **Theological Resources** (e.g., MB Confession of Faith and related materials, resources on ethical questions, etc.).
- **Mission and Evangelism Initiatives** (e.g., Multiply, ONMB camp ministries, church planting, etc.)
- **Educational Initiatives** (e.g., MB Seminary, Columbia Bible College, professional development, Pastoral Credentialing Orientation, conferences, etc.)
- **Government Legal Standing** (e.g., Canadian charitable status, recognized clergy registration, and other legal/financial affiliations).
- **Personnel, Policies, and Procedures** (e.g., policies related to legal charitable status, pastoral job searches, credentialing of pastors, insurance coverage, bylaws, and in some cases internal dispute resolution).
- **Payroll/Mortgages** (e.g., Legacy's mortgage assistance for pastors and churches, payroll services, shared pension and benefits plans, etc.)

The Establishing of Membership with ONMB

Eligibility: Any existing local church and/or new church plant situated in Ontario is welcome to submit a formal application to ONMB. Successful membership with ONMB automatically confers membership with CCMBC.

Requirements for ONMB Membership: As part of the requirements of formal application, the existing church and/or church plant must approve in principle the acceptance into its bylaws of a commitment to affirm and actively demonstrate support for the MB Confession of Faith, ONMB's approved General Operating Bylaws, and the obligations to ONMB and CCMBC articulated here and/or included in any other ONMB church membership covenant. As part of the application process, the applicant church group should report that the motion to become members of ONMB/CCMBC was approved by a minimum of 2/3 majority at a duly called meeting of the local church membership that achieved quorum. If an existing local church is ending its membership with another denominational family, it must end that membership as part of the process of joining ONMB/CCMBC.

ONMB Membership Steps:

Step 1: Either the ONMB Provincial Faith and Life Team (PFLT) or a separate ONMB task force will meet with the applicant church leaders throughout the process to provide assistance and clarity about the expectations for membership.
Step 2: If the appointed PFLT or task force gives its approval to the application, they will make a recommendation for membership to the ONMB Executive Board.
Step 3: The ONMB Executive Board will process that application and if it approves the recommendation, it will make a final recommendation for membership to the next ONMB convention (or a properly called extraordinary ONMB meeting that meets quorum).
Step 4: The ONMB delegates represented at that meeting have the final say in the approval of an application for membership. Approval of a membership application requires a minimum of a 2/3 majority of the votes cast.

Note: The final title and ownership of all assets of a congregation seeking membership with ONMB will be determined according to ONMB's general operating bylaws.

The Ending of Membership with ONMB/CCMBC.

While we value our shared church membership across ONMB and CCMBC, there are times when a local church may choose to end its membership with ONMB/CCMBC for missional, financial, and/or theological reasons. At other times, ONMB/CCMBC may determine that the membership of a local ONMB church may put at risk the well-being, integrity, public witness, and/or missional purpose of our larger family of MB churches at both the provincial and national levels. Because local church membership is first with ONMB, it is the ONMB conference that is the main body overseeing the termination of membership of a local church.

While the ending of a local church's membership will always involve a significant change in our MB family, it is hoped that having clarity about the process for ending membership will increase the likelihood of the ending being positive and least hurtful to the mission and witness of both the local church and the larger MB family of churches.

A local ONMB church's membership with ONMB/CCMBC will end in the following situations:

1. The dissolution of a local ONMB church as a legal entity.
2. The voluntary withdrawal of a local ONMB church from ONMB. This withdrawal request should normally follow from a carefully processed local church motion recommending withdrawal from the ONMB and passed by a minimum of a 2/3 majority of the members present at a properly called meeting that achieved quorum.
3. The action of a local ONMB church becoming officially a member with another denomination. This action will be considered the equivalent of a request for voluntary withdrawal from ONMB conference membership.

In these three situations, this ending of membership will be reported at the next ONMB convention, but no action or approval will be required by convention delegates.

4. The removal of membership by the ONMB conference for reasons of failed obligations on the part of the local ONMB church. ONMB may remove membership by following the steps listed below.

Note: The final title and ownership of all assets held by a local ONMB church in the process of the ending of its ONMB membership will be determined according to ONMB's general operating bylaws.

When We Fail in our Family Obligations: Procedure Steps

ONMB Conference Failures to Meet Obligations to the Local MB Church

In cases where a local ONMB church believes that its ONMB conference leadership (viz. staff, boards, etc.) has failed in its obligations and commitments to the local ONMB church, the local church leadership is encouraged to participate in ONMB's Dispute Resolution Process.

Local ONMB Church Failures to Meet Obligations to ONMB

This policy is designed to provide clear, open, honest, and Christ-honouring steps for situations where it is perceived that a local ONMB church has failed in its membership obligations to the ONMB conference. The hope is that relationships can be restored and obligations fulfilled so that service and mission together can continue.

Since relational healing and restoration are God's work, it is expected that leaders will immerse themselves in a committed time of prayer, calling upon God's Holy Spirit to guide them as they walk through these procedure steps. God's Holy Spirit is present in leaders when they exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; Galatians 5:22-23). This is an important posture to use as a measuring stick for all communication and interactions in the process.

The Procedure Steps will be triggered primarily but not exclusively in the following situations:

- A local ONMB church fails to affirm and support CCMBC's theological DNA (e.g., commitments related to affirming, teaching, supporting, highlighting, and operating in alignment with the MB Confession of Faith). (See *CCMBC General Operating Bylaws*. "A Provincial Conference, in consultation with the National Faith and Life Team and the National Director, may suspend and ultimately withdraw the privilege of membership from any Member Church which ceases to be in agreement with the Confession of Faith" 4.5 2021.)
- A local ONMB church fails to actively participate in the ONMB conference (e.g., not having its pastors credentialed with ONMB, not functioning in alignment with ONMB's conference bylaws, not living in accordance with its membership covenant, ignoring financial obligations without extenuating circumstances approved by ONMB's leadership, etc.).

Step 1: Initial Discernment

When ONMB conference staff persons and/or ONMB board members (e.g., EB or PFLT) become aware that a local ONMB church may be failing to meet one or more of its family obligations listed above, they will share this observation with the ONMB Executive Board Chair. The Board Chair is responsible for establishing a means for facilitating the initial discernment process to establish the validity of this claim.

The Executive Board Chair will pass on the discernment responsibility to the PFLT or to an ad-hoc task force of at least three ONMB staff/Executive Board Members to complete the initial discernment. (The PFLT/task force may conclude that that the perceived failure in obligation primarily involves a credentialed leader failing in their commitments as a credentialed leader—rather than failure on the part of the congregation. In such cases, the PFLT/task force may recommend to the Executive Board a review of the credentialed leader rather than moving forward immediately to Step 2 in this policy.)

If this group concludes that the claim appears to be valid and it poses a risk to the ONMB family's integrity and/or mission, they, in consultation with the ONMB Executive Board, will communicate an expression of concern to the local ONMB church pastor and Board Leadership and will request some further communication and/or a meeting.

It is hoped that this communication and/or meeting between the ONMB conference group and the local ONMB church leaders will clarify motivations and misunderstandings and move toward restoration and renewal of the relationship. If this more informal step reveals that there are significant failures to meet family obligations on the part of the local ONMB church, and initial efforts at reconciliation and restoration have been unsuccessful, the accountability process moves to Step 2.

Note: If the ONMB Executive Board Chair receives a report that a local ONMB church is failing in its obligation and this failure involves the moral failure of a local leader and/or is endangering a vulnerable group, the accountability process should immediately be accelerated to the Formal Review Stage. If the failure involves the breaking of the law, reporting to legal authorities is also required.

Step 2: Formal Review (Suggested Maximum Time Frame: 6 months)
Assuming the unsuccessful resolution of concerns in Step 1, a Formal Review will be initiated by the ONMB Executive Board. The Executive Board will choose to appoint a review team with at least three members representing the ONMB conference staff and Board. The Executive Board may task the PFLT with this responsibility if they so choose. Since a local ONMB church is automatically a member of CCMBC by virtue of their provincial membership, it is expected that the ONMB conference will report to the National Faith and Life Director about one of their churches being part of a Formal Review.

A. The local ONMB church leadership will be provided with official notification of the Formal Review which includes the statement of concerns, rationale for how this constitutes a violation of obligations, and expected steps to restore the relationship between the ONMB church and the ONMB conference.
B. A review meeting with the Review Team and with at least two official representatives of the local ONMB church leadership should be held within sixty (60) days of the formal notification of review. This meeting is designed to clarify questions and move the review process forward to a resolution.
C. Possible outcomes:
    i. It is hoped that the review process will lead to a resolution of concerns and/or a renewed commitment on the part of the local ONMB church to move forward with fulfilling its obligations to the ONMB conference. In cases such as this, a Memo of Understanding (MOU) will be drafted that describes the local ONMB church's renewed commitment/actions to the ONMB conference. Assuming that this is acceptable to the ONMB Executive Board, this MOU would be signed by all parties and the formal review would come to an end. The MOU should involve a shared meeting between the local leadership and the Review Team within six months of its initiation to ensure agreement about the fulfillment of the MOU by all parties.
    ii. If further review meetings are held but there is no moving forward with a resolution, the accountability process moves to step 3.
    iii. If a local ONMB church leadership refuses to participate in the Formal Review process, this will lead the Review Team to step 3.

Step 3: Formal Suspension of Membership (Suggested Maximum Time Frame 6 months)
The Review Team will give its final report to the ONMB Executive Board who will then take over responsibility for the next steps. Assuming a lack of resolution, the Executive Board will send a notice of Formal Suspension of Membership to the local ONMB church leadership. (In the case of a church facing suspension over a lack of agreement with the MB Confession of Faith, the ONMB Executive Board will consult with and inform the National Faith and Life Team and the National Director.) Formal Suspension of Membership means that:

- the local ONMB church cannot send delegates and/or have a means to vote at ONMB and CCMBC conventions or special meetings
- the local ONMB church cannot move forward with the credentialing/licensing of pastoral staff
- unless the local ONMB church takes steps to resolve the causes of their formal suspension, there will be a motion at their next ONMB conference convention (and/or properly called meeting) to bring an end to their membership.

Formal Suspension of Membership will end by means of one of the following outcomes: the ONMB conference delegates give final approval to a motion to remove the membership status of a local ONMB church (step 4); the local ONMB church voluntarily requests the ending of their membership; or the local ONMB church requests to return to membership in good standing based on the offering of an MOU deemed by all parties as an adequate response to the concerns addressed in the Formal Review.

Step 4: Removal of Membership
If Step 3 has not led to a resolution of concerns, the process will move to Step 4. Unless the local ONMB church offers an MOU expressing their willingness and actions to return to membership in good standing, or requests the voluntary ending of their membership, the ONMB conference will move forward with the formal removal of membership from that local church.

This step involves ONMB conference delegate approval of a special motion to remove ONMB conference membership from a local congregation effective on a date within six months of the date of approval of the special motion. This approval would normally require a minimum of a 2/3 majority vote of duly appointed delegates at a ONMB convention but also could be approved by the same majority vote of duly appointed delegates at a special extraordinary meeting conducted according to ONMB bylaws.

The ending of the membership of a local ONMB church with ONMB has the following implications (this is not an exhaustive list):

- The local church is no longer part of a registered group recognized by the ONMB and CCMBC charters.
- The local church is no longer a member of either the ONMB or CCMBC.
- The local church will normally need to pursue both independent legal and charitable standing in order to meet CRA requirements.
- The local church will need to enter new legal arrangements as needed (e.g., liability insurance, leadership board insurance, etc.)
- All ONMB credentialed pastors and leaders whose membership continues in a church that is no longer a member of a ONMB will have their credentialing/provincial licensing status ended at the same time as the membership end date of the local church. (Any credentialed pastor/leader who desires to continue their credential status on a temporary basis must apply in writing to the ONMB Provincial Faith and Life Team with a rationale that is consistent with their Credentialing Policy.

Options include a credentialed leader seeking a pastoral role in another ONMB church in good standing; a credentialed leader serving in a parachurch organization seeking membership in another ONMB church in good standing; a credentialed leader needing to maintain their religious representative status in order to officiate a wedding. The PFLT reserves the right to deny these requests as they see fit.)

- The local church will need to explore the future status of relationships with all CCMBC partner organizations (e.g., Legacy, Multiply, MB Seminary) and related agencies (e.g., MCC, MDS, etc.).

Reinstatement of a Former ONMB Church to Membership in Good Standing

Reinstatement will be up to the wisdom and discretion of the ONMB Executive Board, but the decision would be initiated by the former ONMB church's request to return to membership in good standing and the offering of an MOU considered acceptable to the ONMB Executive Board. Reinstatement will also involve the same approval by delegates at the ONMB conference convention (or special extraordinary meeting) as required for approval of any new congregation.

Appeals

Since the ONMB conference delegates give final approval to individual church requests for membership and to recommendations related to the removal of an individual church's membership with the ONMB conference, these decisions are not subject to an appeal.