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ELKHART, Ind. – In 1982, when the idea of a joint confession faith for the former Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church started germinating, an MC committee advised in a report that a new such document should be “timeless!”

“With an exclamation point,” presenter Susan Biesecker-Mast told a June 8–10 consultation on *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

After eight years of discernment and development, the confession was adopted by GC and MC delegates in 1995. Today it is the confession of faith of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, the successors to the denominations that first approved it. While the confession remains an essential faith document, it is not timeless, no matter the punctuation, consultation participants repeatedly said.

“It’s not Scripture, even if we’d like to treat it that way,” said Steve Kriss, director of communication and leadership cultivation for Franconia Conference.

The consultation, “Holding Fast to the Confession of Our Hope,” drew 142 people from 24 states and four provinces to Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary to assess how *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has served the church in the 11 years since it was adopted. The event was sponsored by AMBS’s Institute of Mennonite Studies and Church Leadership Center with two other groups, the Anabaptist Sociology and Anthropology Association and the Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network, who also held independent sessions.

The consultation emphasized new ways of responding to a changing world. Issues such as megachurches, terrorism, increasing urbanization, global economics, the growth of Islam and the mushrooming membership among people of color offer challenges in ways not apparent when work on the confession was underway.

“In the end a written confession can never live up to our hopes, it shouldn’t have to, and we shouldn’t make it,” said respondent Eileen Klassen Hamm, program director of Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan.

Nowhere has change been as acute as in Pacific Southwest Conference, where 20 of its 39 congregations have emerged in the past seven years. In Southern California specifically, 95 percent of the membership is new to the Mennonite Church and 87 percent were born outside the United States, having come to the region from countries such as Nigeria, Indonesia, China and Mexico.

In a plenary address, Jeff Wright, a conference minister for Pacific Southwest, said *Confession of Faith in an Anabaptist Perspective* is important for creating identity, which is essential for mission. “Without a clear identity, the church cannot discern her unique missionary call from God,” he said. “Without a missionary impulse, our identity tends to dissolve into quasi-celebrations of the past.”

That doesn’t mean the confession addresses everything pertinent to new Mennonites in Southern California. For example, as a result of the Christian expressions in their native countries, many have a Pentecostal/charismatic inclination, with an emphasis on the Holy Spirit in personal experience. Yet the confession is largely silent on the subject.

Nevertheless, Wright said, the confession has been embraced as “a way to engage the biblical text for faith-seeking understanding.” It is even used as a textbook in a Pacific Southwest-sponsored course for new pastors.

But the confession hasn’t been as well received in some more traditional Mennonite areas. While a number of pastors said they use it for membership classes and quote from it in

sermons, it is not a key resource everywhere. "Most of the time the confession of faith sits on my shelf, within arm's length, but alas, I have yet to read it cover to cover," said Ron Kennel, pastor of Clinton Brick Mennonite Church, a 150-year-old congregation in rural Elkhart County, Ind.

He said being Mennonite is less important to his congregation than being Christian. As a result, the confession seems secondary. "It's not the Scriptures, which is the primary sourcebook for my people and me," Kennel said. "Although I don't quote from the confession of faith [when preaching], I do what the confession of faith does: I appeal to the Bible."

Yet Mennonites have something wanted and needed by the world, participants repeatedly said. But a confession of faith, which helps define a body's distinctives, inherently puts its adherents at tension with people who are not Mennonite, speaker April Yamasaki argued. That is particularly problematic as Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada are called to be *missional*. "Is there such a thing as necessary, even healthy, separation ... while at the same time reaching across to other groups?" asked Yamasaki, pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, B.C.

The confession of faith also produces tension among those who identify themselves as Mennonite. Recently retired Bluffton University religion professor J. Denny Weaver took exception to the "teaching position" description that is commonly given to the confession.. "As soon as you start to teach, you're excluding, because you're saying people who disagree with this aren't part of it," he said.

Said Rudy Baergen, chair of Mennonite Church Canada's Faith and Life Committee, "In some settings it has closed off discussion rather than being a stepping stone."

Helmut Harder, who was one of the primary authors of the confession, admitted that not all members of the committee that prepared it were in agreement on everything. He said the document was meant to be a "summary statement" of the beliefs the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church had in common at the time they were exploring their merger. They placed their reservations "under the care of the Holy Spirit."

Harder said the confession needs to hold a prominent but flexible position in the church. "Give and take begins with a common respect for the confession of faith," he said. "God speaks not only through Scripture but also in the ongoing interpretation of Scripture."

The controversial Article 19, "Family, Singleness and Marriage," was criticized by a panel of "young scholars," but not just because of its position on homosexuality.

Elaine Swartzentruber, a theology professor at Wake Forest University, wondered why familial relationships needed special attention. "Are they any different than any other relationship," she asked. "Why is it that Mennonites are talking about family in such a way. ... It's a political gesture."

Jonathan Seiling, a doctoral student at the Toronto School of Theology, said the church is "not a collection of biological, nuclear families" but of individuals. "The problem is not that we are not marrying Christian spouses," he said. "The problem is that so many Christian spouses aren't taking their lives as Christians seriously."

But Swartzentruber concluded her critique with hope. "I want us to say something that will make my children's lives better ... and the lives of all the children in the world," she said.

The consultation included plenary addresses, panel discussions and presentations on topics such as congregational applications of the confession, discipline, peace, the Lord's Supper and disagreeing with the confession.