

September 2003, *Equipping*



WHY DID PEOPLE VOTE “NO” TO RESOLUTION #6 AT THE ST. CATHARINES ASSEMBLY?

Resolution # 6 was presented to the delegates at MC Canada’s assembly in St. Catharines by the Resolutions Committee at the request of two delegates from Niverville Mennonite Church (Manitoba) who had to catch their flights before the resolution was presented on Saturday afternoon. With discernment by the Resolutions Committee¹ and in consultation with the Niverville delegates, the final resolution presented to delegates read as follows:

Since we believe that marriage is the joining of one man and one woman in a life-long covenant of love, and

Since the Prime Minister has indicated his intention to have the Federal Government redefine marriage in future legislation;

Be it resolved that the General Board communicate to the Federal Government Mennonite Church Canada’s understanding of marriage and our encouragement that, whatever action the government should take to redefine marriage, all religious groups be guaranteed the freedom to practice and proclaim their understanding of what marriage is.

At the end of a long day and the end of the assembly with no background and limited time for discussion, this resolution drew a number of comments from the floor. A ballot vote was called for and the resolution passed by a vote of 131 to 130, with 16 spoiled ballots. (Note that this total is substantially lower than the 372 delegates registered.)

What does this vote mean? Only that the delegates were not of one mind as to whether the General Board should write such a letter. Any further interpretation is a projection of what particular delegates may have meant with their vote. The following notes offer some interpretations.

In conversations with a number of delegates, the following reasons for voting no to the resolution have been named:

- 1) Some people felt that those who brought the resolution should have been available to speak to their intent;
- 2) Some people didn't see the need for the resolution, given the fact that the Canadian government has never forced us to perform marriages we don't want to perform;
- 3) Some people would like to engage in a conversation about church/state matters before making representations to the government (i.e., - should we as a church be in the marrying business at all, or might it be better for the state to do the legal act and churches/denominations to bless/not bless unions as we see fit, according to our beliefs);
- 4) Some people felt the resolution was poorly worded and were unclear about its meaning;
- 5) Some people perceived the motion to be a request to re-affirm something that the church has already said in its Confession of Faith and resented being asked to do that;
- 6) Some people expressed concern that the reference to "all religious groups" might include people who believe in polygamy, same-sex marriages etc. and that we might be unwittingly promoting their freedom to do so;
- 7) Some people do not agree that our understanding of marriage cannot include same-sex couples.

¹ Ray Friesen (chair—Zion Mennonite Church, Saskatchewan), Barb Draper (Floradale Mennonite Church, Ontario), Amy Peters (Bethel Mennonite Church, Manitoba), Garry Janzen (Sherbrooke Mennonite Church, BC)

There may have been other factors not yet identified. It is impossible to determine what proportion of delegates was influenced by which factors or combinations of factors.

The following excerpts are from a letter by an individual who spoiled their ballot because of the confusion. These excerpts illustrate the confusion many experienced:

“This resolution was difficult to interpret for the following reasons:

“1) There was little time to review the implications of the motion. Many of us did not read it before Saturday morning and even afternoon. This issue is complex and we need more time to process it.

“2) Those who submitted the resolution were not in attendance to respond to questions raised during the question period.

- Are we being asked to make a negative statement about homosexual marriage?
- Are we being asked to decide an issue before we realize what we are deciding?
- Was this motion suggesting that our understanding of marriage was under attack from our federal government?
- Does this resolution support the government’s proposed changes to the definition of marriage?
- Does this resolution suggest that the government’s proposed changes to the definition of marriage are supported by MC Canada? Under this interpretation this would enable MC Canada and other churches to more easily change their own definitions of marriage in the future.

“3) The determination of how to vote was difficult. If one planned to vote against the motion, it might appear that we were opposed to the definition of marriage given in the first sentence or opposed to the federal government’s proposed future legislation or both. If we planned to vote for the motion, we may be understood to be planning to change our own definition of marriage in the future or trying to protect our current definition. These are quite different interpretations of the motion.

“Does the government want to know our understanding of marriage? Was this freedom ever at risk?

“Maybe it would be wise for us to understand our own views – do some discerning. The notion of civil marriage is not as old as the New Testament. State recognition is a relatively recent phenomenon, whereas family and community recognition is ancient. The Constantinian synthesis is one of the key elements in the transition to our present state of affairs.

“How old is church recognition in the formal legal sense? What part does the church or the state have in defining marriage? Is there confusion caused by the use of the one word ‘marriage’ in two distinct contexts – ecclesial and political? By answering these questions, we may find a way through this morass. How does a missional church think this through?”

In spite of the confusion the delegates did vote to pass the resolution. (Some have argued that the mandate was weak, but it met the standard of a simple majority of votes cast [bylaw 11.3] and it is not appropriate for the Board to change the threshold nor to set aside the majority vote, since those are the rules we have agreed to follow.) The following letter has been drafted to be sent to the Prime Minister and copied to The Honourable Martin Cauchon, Minister of Justice:

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

Together with other religious groups in Canada, Mennonite Church Canada has followed with interest the public debates, the Justice Committee task force tour and the several provincial court cases regarding the changing legal definition of marriage.

The definition in our denominational Confession of Faith is that “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church.” Although we disagree with the direction it is taking, we understand that the societal and legal definition is changing. It is our intention to retain the practice of blessing and sanctifying marriages according to our convictions.

We are encouraged by the reported intention of the government to include in the legislation the protection of religious leaders who refuse to sanctify same-sex marriages. We believe this is a significant issue of religious liberty and urge you to be forceful in the wording of this protection in the legislation that will be presented to parliament.

This letter is consistent with other representations made by Mennonite Church Canada in concert with other churches in the Canadian Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee. It is also consistent with a pastoral letter sent by denominational minister Sven Eriksson to pastors on June 27, 2003 — a letter that provides clear and wise guidance to pastors for reflecting on the church’s response to the government initiative (copies available). And it is consistent with our confession of faith and denominational statements on marriage, family and sexuality (copies available).