

Introduction

Credit to David Boshart, EB board member, Conference minister in Central Plains. The first slides were part of a presentation to CLC this past spring. He teaches polity at EMS.

Intentional conversations about Mennonite Polity are relatively new **and** relatively rare in our tradition.

We are a group of people who have many different experiences in and with the church, at different level, and at varying degrees of complexity.

The invitation to address polity here is an attempt to get us a little closer to one another in our understandings about this word "Polity."
and how we are using it.

Mennonite Polity

What is it?

Why does it matters?

To begin with, I suspect there is more understanding of Polity around this room that you might think. To get at that, I'd like you to begin by doing quick response, everyone talk at the same time in two and threes.

List the **people and structures** that would be involved if the following issues came up in your context:

- 1.The carpet on the platform in the sanctuary has become threadbare.
- 2.An argument arises in your congregation over whether membership can be extended to someone who chosen profession requires them to carry a gun.
3. The congregation has decided to join your conference, but has open support for Sherriff Joe Arizon's tough laws on deportation.
- 4.Ervin Stutzman decides that an annual retreat for the cabinet should be held on a cruise in south pacific.

As you've heard the first things people say, did we offer the same things? In the same order? Did we all go to the same places first? Probably with the carpet and less as the geography involved broadened.

Point here is that when faced with an issue where decisions need to be made, we immediately begin reaching for the **relevant people, structures, and processes** that will help us make the decision.

What you are reaching for is "Polity."

Mennonite Polity: What is It?

- Simple definition of Polity: The way we do things around here.

Polity: What is it?

From Greek word "Polis" which means city - or people in a particular location who identify together

Where we get words: Politics, Police, -polis, but also Policy and Polite (how we properly act)

Has to do with citizenship - how people with a common identity properly behave, act, function for the good of the whole.

Has to do with governance systems

But really it's a very simple idea: It really boils down to mutually agreed and understood (formally and informally) "the way we do things around here."

Classic Forms of Polity

- Episcopal Model



Decisions are made by one person or very few people and are passed down to the rest of the community.

See Sian and Stuart Murray Williams, *The Power of All*. Pp. 141-143

Just like cultures and languages which emerge and change, so also are polities varied in different settings, in various tradition.

There three classic, broad forms of polity

In their book, "The Power of All" Stuart and Sian Murray Williams have a done a nice in a couple of pages to described each of these

You'll recognize that some of these forms show up in the names of some traditions - so it's easy to identify churches that might align with one or another of these forms.

Several things to remember:

1. There are no "pure" forms.
2. When claiming a form, there is a natural tendency to think that form is best which leads to,
3. A natural tendency to compare the best of our form with the worst of the other
 1. Or when we are feeling cynical about how we do things, compare their best to our worst.

When things are going well in a system, with the right people in the right position, most any structure will work.

(on slide)

Episcopal Model

Presbytery Model

Congregational Model

Classic Forms of Polity

- Presbytery Model



Involves extensive consultation between members of the congregation and those who have a leadership role

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Episcopal Model

Presbytery Model

Congregational Model

Classic Forms of Polity

• Congregational Model

Decisions are made by the whole community meeting to discern together, or by as many as choose to be involved.

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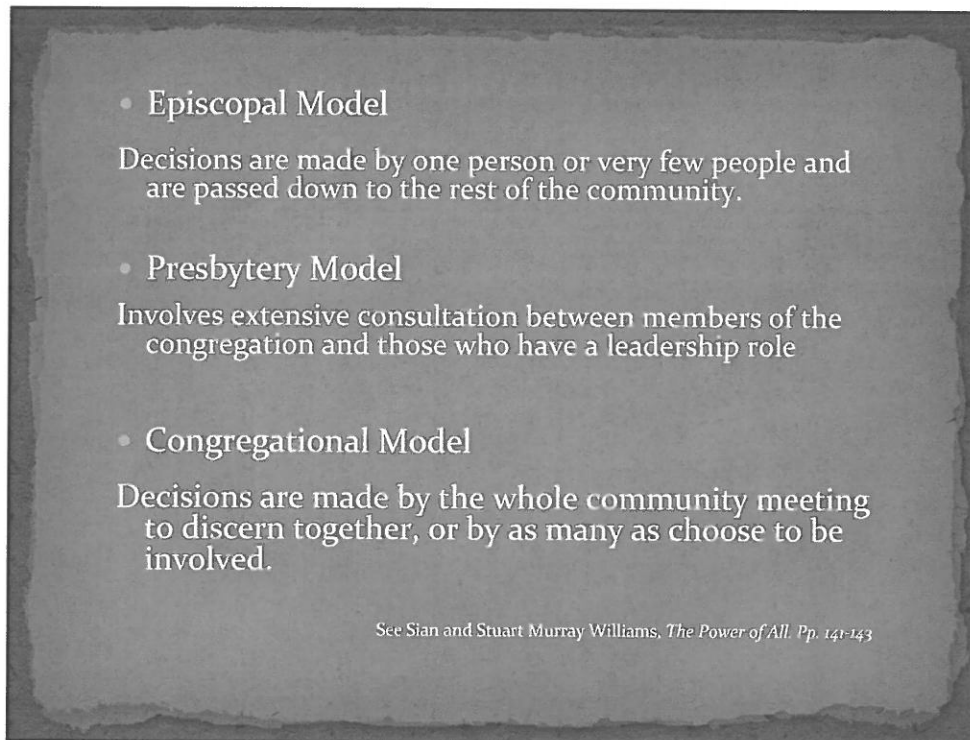
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Episcopal Model

Presbytery Model

Congregational Model



The Murray Williamses do a great service in identifying the strengths and weakness of all three forms.

Episcopal

•Strengths

- Clear and Decisive
- Allows Gifted Leaders to Exercise their Gifts
- Embodies Trust In Those Chosen to Lead
- Decisions can be made quickly
- Releases others to focus on other things

•Weaknesses

- Places high expectations on leaders
- Susceptible to abuse by unscrupulous, dictatorial, insecure leaders
- Draws on a limited insights and experiences of others
- The community may not “own” the decision

Presbytery/Synod

•Strengths

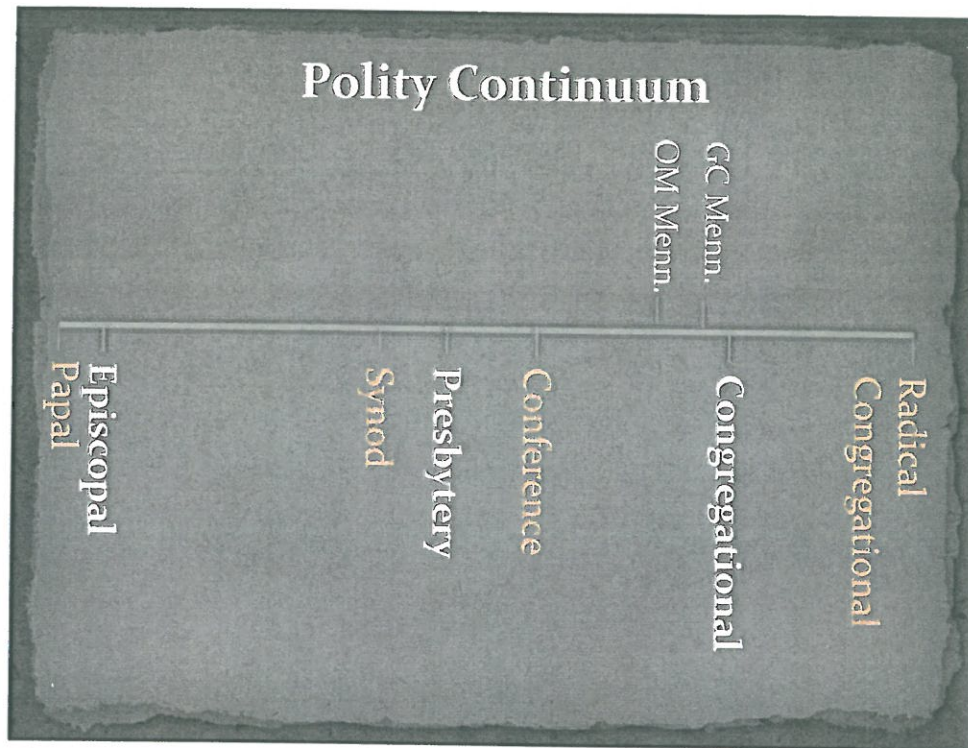
- Strong on consultation and ownership
- Recognizes that different decisions may be required for different situations and communities

•Weaknesses

- Prone to becoming bureaucratic and cumbersome
- Can be disempowering to the local context

Congregational

•Strengths



We can create a polity continuum from centralized to decentralized structures and processes:

Here we see the three: Episcopal, Presbytery, and Congregational
 I add here some nuanced additions Papal, Synod, Conference and Radical Congregationalism

In our memories of our former denominations we spend a fair amount of time contrasting the way we did things around here. Taken out of the context of larger church polity, we can make the MC and GC groups the poles of the continuum, when in fact they are very close to one another in the broader scheme of things. We too are not above comparing the best of one with the worst of the other - and we do that largely through the folk history that we tell that may not accurately reflect the true Polity that undergirded the anecdotes. For example, anecdotes out of Lancaster as archetype for a larger body. Or the Russian emigration experience as archetypal for the larger body. We have 100 year old native congregations and other older Racial/Ethnic congregations that have enough history that make it possible - if we want to - to talk about polity from these perspectives as well.

Let's do some practicing with these concept by getting ourselves out of our tradition by considering a case study from another congregational tradition. It's excerpted from a new Article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch from just last December - it's very current.

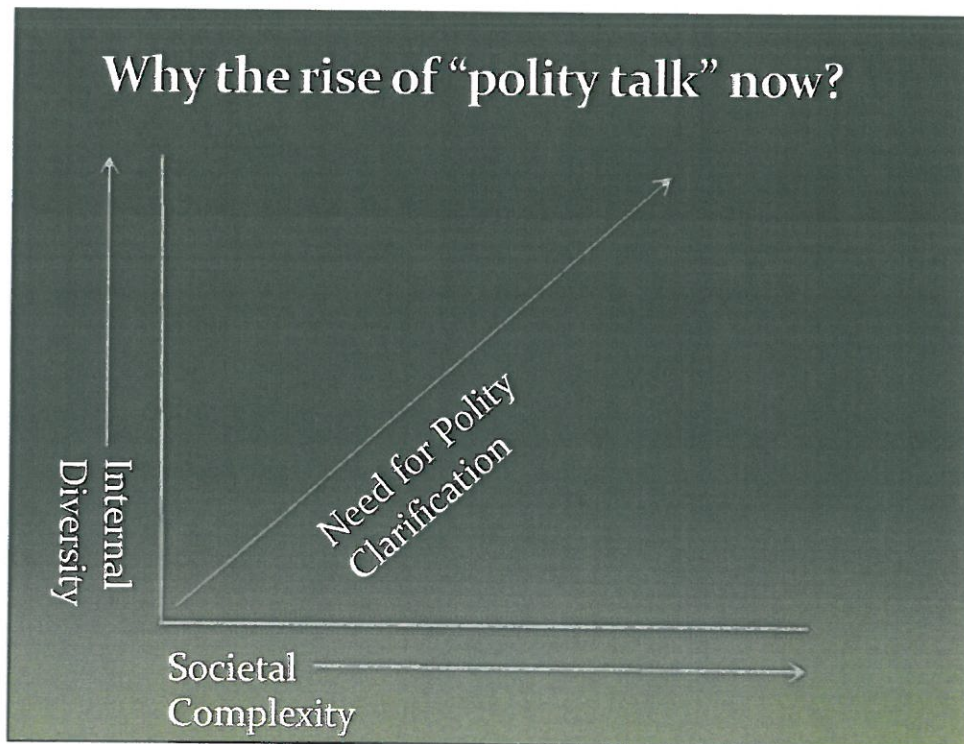
Mennonite Polity

Why should we care?

Flat structure polities are naturally distrustful of those who describe reality on behalf of the whole. Sound familiar?

Mennonite Church USA is still in its infancy

- Polity is conceptual work
- Theories are created to describe phenomena not project outcomes
- We have limited experience within the new denomination to articulate a conceptual polity
- The merger that created MC USA was born out of sociological affinity more than theological or ecclesial mandate - weren't always clear about that
 - Leaders may have been thinking more theologically or in terms of mission (mission transformation team)
 - But something else was happening at the popular level - sociological affinity
 - That combination resulted in some things operating under the surface that were not formally named and managed
 - Losses of power when two uneven bodies merge
 - What is preserved and what is lost from our familiar ways of being
 - Shifts in geographical influence of power centers
 - The tendency to compare the best tendencies of one side of the household with the worst tendencies of the other
 - In a pseudo-congregational polity, all of this leads to a deconstructionist tendency - we name what is not and never get around to *or* refuse to allow anyone - to say what is



So why all this talk about Polity now and in the last fifteen years? Are we simply becoming the Presbyterians who focus on “all things being done decently and in order?” Are we becoming more professionalized as a church and the natural thing is to draft detailed policy manuals? Whatever the reason, what might be driving this conversation.

I would propose that there are some good reason why we are having this polity talk now.

As societal complexity increases (no question about that) and our internal diversity increases (no questions about that either), the need to be explicit in clarifying our polity increases proportionately.

Having said that, Polity development is not a means to an end in itself - it is a tool to help find our way from here to there:

- In a way that foster the unity of the church
- In a way that honors the gifts of all
- In a way that helps us identify what we care about most
- In away that keeps us focused on whatever we say the main things is.

The *Relative* Importance of Polity

So to keep Polity in perspective, let's understand that the importance of Polity is relative to other things that are more important:

- The best structures and most carefully outlined processes will not save us from the ill effect of low trust and bad relationships.
 - I have stories to tell, and likely you do to!
- We can survive deeply flawed structures and inconsistent processes if relationships are strong and trust level is high



Current polity we have in place for
Mennonite Church USA

We have a number of documents which represent the polity which we seek to use to guide us through the many levels of life in the church.

A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership

- Theology of congregational leadership
- History
- Polity for ministers relating to local, regional and denominational structures
- Qualifications for ministry
- Ministerial ethics
- Glossary

This may be one of the clearest and most ambitious statements we have on polity. It grew out of the hard work of understanding leadership for the purposes of bringing the two denominations together. Sections are:

Theological understanding of leadership and ordination
History of leadership with us
Practical polity for pastors
Ethics
Glossary

1996 - Written and it took almost ten years to do it.

Guess what, the world has changed and so has the way we relate and work together. We are revising and updating it to reflect the church we are and want to become.

Confession of Faith

How does it serve the church?

- Provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture
- Supply guidance for Christian belief and practice
- Build a foundation for unity within and among Mennonite and other Christian churches
- Offer an outline for instructing new believers and for sharing information with seekers
- Anchor Christian belief and practice in changing times
- Aid in sharing Mennonite belief and practice with others

P 8 (and back cover)

Membership Guidelines

- Basis for Membership
- Policy and practice of membership

Written as a way to bring the two denominations together, through a tense time of negotiating.

I - Basis for Membership of conferences to Denomination. Pathways to be and become members of the denomination are written here. Covenant, Accountability, Unity, Diversity.

II - Policy and practice of membership. –

Foundational agreements –

Within this framework local discernment on how to apply these principles, in consultation with broader church

Congregations – full authority to determine criteria for persons joining and leaving the congregation, in consultation with area conference. And in consideration of what is expected by members of MC USA. Congregations become part of MC USA only through membership in an area conference. Membership to congregations is determined by the congregations themselves. (Membership Guidelines II.3) No litmus test the conference or denomination offers as a template. And yet, we do it in consultation with and aware of what decisions locally mean to other congregations in the area conference

Both of our former denominations have clear rootedness in congregationalism, very similar continuum placement. Lancaster conference leader sharing. The congregation I pastored in Ohio, Kidron Mennonite, started in 1936 when on one orchestrated Sunday morning, at the second hymn, 331 members stood up and walked out of the service. Rejecting the hierarchical authority of the leaders and the structures. CC history as well

Purposeful Plan

- Clarity of Vision
- Establishment of priorities and goals
- Assessment of current reality
- Five Choices to make
- Four polarities to manage

Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love

- In Thought
- In Action
- In Life

Table Discussion questions

- In what ways can we as a conference stay in relationship with congregations and other conferences when our understanding of the span of authority of polity is different?
- How can we remained focused on a common vision rather than divisive issues of the day?

In all of these documents which in one way or another are part of the pool of polity which we hold together, there is the realization

Change - it is constant

Diversity –

And yet mutual submission and accountability for the good of the whole.