

V. CONGREGATIONAL DISAGREEMENT WITH ANNUAL CONFERENCE DECISIONS

Annual Conference 2004 approved the report of a study committee assigned to examine a query asking how congregations can disagree with Annual Conference decisions yet remain, as much as possible, in unbroken fellowship with their sister congregations, including how district boards should respond in these situations. The paper needs to be read in its entirety to get the full background and impact of the report. The following is the section giving suggestions for process and guidance to the congregation for its response to disagreeing congregations.³⁰

A. SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESS

Because congregations may disagree with Annual Conference decisions, it is appropriate to consider a process when disagreement is evident. Since disagreement is heavily impacted by individual and unique circumstances and often must be considered on a case-by-case basis, the following is not intended as polity to be applied unilaterally throughout the denomination for each individual case. Rather, it is intended to outline broad parameters in which it is hoped that congregations and districts can find suggestions that will help us work towards reconciliation and satisfactory resolution within our understanding of community. The goal of the following process is to find God's truth together in a respectful Christian community. It is hoped that any congregation that feels led to disagree with Annual Conference decisions should assume a special responsibility to initiate extended dialog with others in the denomination about its choice. In so doing, the congregation should not automatically assume the role of prophet, but rather, try to model and encourage a spirit of finding the mind of Christ amid diversity in discernment.

B. GUIDANCE TO THE CONGREGATION

It is expected that congregations would recognize a foundational covenant within the denomination "to support faithfully the program of the Church of the Brethren, recognizing Annual Conference enactments of the Church of the Brethren as having governing force in its life"³¹ and that "the congregation has an ethical responsibility to support the denomination."³² Accordingly, disagreement with an Annual Conference decision should be a rare exception rather than a common event. When disagreement exists, the congregation is encouraged to:

- complete a thorough study of the Annual Conference action including biblical understandings, historical understandings, and any suggested bibliographical resources;
- seek counsel from the district executive and engage in conversations regarding the disagreement before any congregational action is considered. If the integrity of the community, the body of Christ, is to be preserved, the congregation must engage in conversations before taking action that might be misinterpreted and viewed as defiance and disloyalty;
- seek additional counsel from persons familiar with the Annual Conference action and who can provide helpful explanation. These persons might include the district Standing Committee members, district Mission and Ministry Board member, and Annual Conference officers;
- give opportunity for voices within the congregation to be heard, giving careful consideration to basic Christian conduct, and protect those who may have a minority opinion.

If efforts to resolve the disagreement are unsuccessful, and it is evident that the disagreement will be a continuing hindrance to the relationship of the congregation with the larger church, congregational leadership should write a letter to district leadership outlining:

- the specifics of the disagreement citing specific Annual Conference action;
- a thorough description of the congregation's position;
- what the congregation has done in an attempt to understand the Annual Conference action;
- what the congregation has done in an attempt to resolve the disagreement with the Annual Conference action;
- how this disagreement will impact the ministry of the congregation;
- what action, if any, the congregation is considering as a result of the disagreement;
- what type of response the congregation would like to receive from district leadership.

¹ This “Congregational Structure” section is taken from the 2000 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Structure,” 204-231, which offers congregations a new model of organization. Key changes from the previous polity include: 1) emphasis on mission, vision, and core functions; 2) a leadership team instead of a church board; 3) ministry teams instead of commissions; 4) a gifts discernment process rather than elections; 5) integration of the deacon ministry into the structure of the congregation; and 6) formation of a pastoral relations committee. Sections unchanged by this new model come largely from the 1964 Minutes (1955–1964), “Congregational Organization and Polity, 306-318.

² 1987 Minutes (1985–1989), “Revisions of Brethren Polity,” 489-490.

³ 1985 Minutes (1985–1989), “Membership Study,” 129-131.

⁴ 2000 Minutes, “Congregational Structure,” 208.

⁵ 2002 Minutes (2000-2004), “Update Discipleship and Reconciliation Polity,” 726-735. The Shalom Team polity can be found in chapter 3 of this manual.

⁶ 2000 Minutes, “Congregational Structure,” 213-214; 1983 Minutes (1980–1984), “Office of the Deacon,” 560-571, especially 570; 1997 Minutes (1995-1999), “Deacon Ministry in the Church of the Brethren, Query: Office of Deacon,” 556-571.

⁷ See 1997 Minutes (1995-1999), “Deacon Ministry in the Church of the Brethren, Query: Office of Deacon,” 570.

⁸ 1987 Minutes (1985–1989), “Revisions of Brethren Polity,” 490. Based on 1954 Minutes (1945–1954), “Keeping Church Records,” 215.

⁹ 1965 Minutes (1965–1969), “District Organization and Relationships,” 29.

¹⁰ See Chapter 5 of this chapter, “The Ministry.”

¹¹ Subsequent polity regarding the role and function of the local church moderator was adopted in 2004. See 2004 Minutes (2000-2004), “The Functions and Qualifications of the Local Church Moderator,” 1251-1254, which is reproduced in section II of this chapter.

¹² The list of duties of the ministry teams is based on guidelines developed by the former General Board in 1974, in response to a request that the brief descriptions in Annual Conference minutes be expanded and clarified. Additional guidelines appear in *Developing New Congregations in the Church of the Brethren: A Manual for New Church Planters* (Church of the Brethren General Board, 1983) and *Releasing the Power: A Manual of Policies and Guidelines Assisting Congregations in Development and Renewal* (Church of the Brethren General Board, 1986).

¹³ For background, see 1971 Minutes (1970–1974), “Study of the Church Year,” 156-157; and 1973 Minutes (1970–1974), “The Pastoral Year and the Church Year,” 352-353.

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- ¹⁴ 2004 Minutes (2000-2004), “The Functions and Qualifications of the Local Church Moderator,” 1251-1254.
- ¹⁵ 1955 Minutes (Conference Minutes for the 169th recorded Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren), “The Functions of an Elder,” 9-11. Note: this portion of the 1955 Minutes does not appear in the published volume of 1955-1964 Minutes.
- ¹⁶ 1967 Minutes (1965-1969), “A New Basis of the Eldership,” 235.
- ¹⁷ 2000 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Structure,” 222.
- ¹⁸ 1971 Minutes (1970–1974), “Merger Procedures,” 154; definitions from 150-151.
- ¹⁹ 1971 Minutes (1970-1974), “Merger Procedures,” 153. The district polity referred to here can be found in section IV “District Relationships with Other Denominational Bodies” of chapter 3 of this manual.
- ²⁰ 2014 Minutes, “Congregational Ethics Polity,” 258-274.
- ²¹ 1992 *Manual of Organization and Polity*, 119.
- ²² Introduction section A.6. in the Overview file of this December 2015 edition of the manual.
- ²³ Section I.C.4.6. “The Church Denominational” in this chapter.
- ²⁴ Section I.A. “Trust Relationship” in chapter 6 of this manual.
- ²⁵ Section I.C.4.b. “The Church Denominational” in this chapter.
- ²⁶ Introduction section A.3. in the Overview file of this December 2015 edition of the manual.
- ²⁷ Section I.C.5.a. “Meaning of Membership” in this chapter.
- ²⁸ 2008 Minutes (2005-2008), “Update to Ministerial Ethics,” 1205-1231. The Ethics in Ministerial Relations polity can be found in section II of chapter 5 of this manual.
- ²⁹ Section IV of the Ethics in Ministerial Relations polity, “Process for Dealing with Complaints of Ministerial Misconduct,” can be found in section II.D. of chapter 5 of this manual.
- ³⁰ 2004 Minutes (2000-2004), “Query on Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions,” 1276-1277.
- ³¹ 2000 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Structure,” 206.
- ³² 1996 Minutes (1995-1999), “Statement of Ethics for Congregations in the Church of the Brethren,” 331.