

Pacific Southwest District

Process for Responding to Congregational Disagreements with Annual Conference and/or District Conference Decisions

4 Background

5 At the 2004 Annual Conference, the delegate body passed a paper originating from the South/Central
6 Indiana District about how congregations can disagree with Annual Conference decisions yet remains in
7 unbroken fellowship with the sister congregations. The concern of the paper was, “How can the Church
8 of the Brethren speak with one voice and yet respect dissenting views?” More specifically, the paper
9 addressed how districts should respond to situations when a congregation disagrees with Annual
10 Conference decision(s).

11 Each district is encouraged to develop a framework for processing a congregational disagreement with
12 an Annual Conference action before a potential disagreement develops. The 2004 Annual Conference
13 paper recommended that each process should be flexible enough to allow for the wide variations of each
14 case, yet specific enough to offer accountability and direction. The Pacific Southwest District Board of
15 Administration agreed that such a process needs to incorporate District Conference decisions as well.

16 The 2010 PSWD District Conference received a proposed document to be used in this district that had
17 been approved and forwarded by the Board of Administration at its August 28, 2010 meeting. The
18 board recommended adoption of the proposed policy statement. However, discussion on the floor of the
19 conference resulted in a variety of questions being raised about the paper, and an amendment to delete
20 most of the contents of the paper was proposed but then withdrawn. A substitute motion was then
21 proposed and adopted, which read as follows:

22 “Grounded in the Unity Statement and conscious of our theological and cultural diversity, the Pacific
23 Southwest District Conference will appoint a five-person study committee to develop a framework for
24 conversation around the areas of tension, in a spirit of love and acceptance as we focus on Christ, and
25 report to the District Conference 2011.”

26 The District Conference further directed the Board of Administration to appoint a committee. The
27 committee consisted of: Linda Davis, Jeanine Ewert, Tom Hostetler and Sara Haldeman-Scarr, Doris
28 Dunham, Lois Frantz and Reba Herder. PSWD Board Chair Don Fancher, Moderator Karen Walters and
29 District Executive Don Booz, served ex-officio. This paper, with its explanatory material and policy
30 recommendation, was formulated by the committee over a series of meetings and e-mails during the
31 past year.

32 Introduction

33 In 2007, the Pacific Southwest District unanimously approved a Unity Statement, declaring:

34 “On this 300th anniversary of the founding of the Church of the Brethren, we remember the words
35 of Jesus:

36 “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one
37 another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you
38 have for each other.” (John 13: 34, 35; The Message)

39 Recognizing we are a living peace church, and that God is constantly revealing, we commit to
40 humble ourselves, and to engage in the tension of community necessary for new birth.

41 Not focusing on our differences, but in the spirit of love and acceptance, we choose to focus
42 on Christ.

43 We purpose to remain open, as we listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit, working in love to
44 mutually support and encourage our various ministries. “

45 The Unity Statement provides a vision for our district which recognizes that all are welcome at the table.
46 We seek to be faithful to this call, even in times of differences, acknowledging that we do not seek
47 uniformity, but conversation with one another as we seek the mind of Christ.

48 Matthew 18:15-20 has been the primary model for settling differences among the Brethren for nearly three
49 centuries. The text suggests a multi-step process. First, the two opposing persons talk over their
50 disagreement face to face (18:15). Second, if there is no resolution, then a third impartial person is brought
51 in to hear the two sides as a mediator (18:16). Third, if the issue is still not resolved, then the situation is
52 taken to the church for their action (18:17a). Fourth, Jesus says, “...if he refuses to listen even to the church,
53 treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” At this point in the text, we recognize a tension within
54 the Body of Christ as it has been experienced in the Church of the Brethren. Some see within this passage
55 an expectation that the church’s answer be accepted, with serious implications for dissension. Others see
56 an expectation that even when there is not agreement, we do not disengage in relationship, but work even
57 harder at love and mercy, as in Jesus’ attitude toward others. (18:17b).

58 The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:1 through 7:27, was accepted by the early Brethren as “ethics” for
59 today and was not restricted to some future time. This includes strong teaching to be merciful to one another
60 (5:5-7), to work at peacemaking (5:9), to pursue reconciliation as a top priority (5:21-26), to show love to
61 those who are mistreating us (5:38-48), and to judge others with grace (6:14-15, 7:1-5).

62 In 2008, Annual Conference approved a Resolution Urging Forbearance. That Resolution is germane to this
63 discussion. Parts of it read:

64 Forbearance is a biblical concept. The Greek words in the New Testament translated as forbearance
65 carry meanings of patience, self-control, restraint, mercy, long-suffering, and the refusal to threaten
66 (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13; Eph. 6:9, 2 Cor. 12:6). Forbearance does not jeopardize or denigrate individual
67 conviction, but it does place boundaries on the quality and character of individual responses.
68 Forbearance does not require one to accept what another believes, but it does require one to listen and
69 try to understand what another believes without demeaning, personal attacks, or acting to disenfranchise
70 the other person.

71 Brethren have grown in the practice of forbearance. We accept Annual Conference positions as
72 invitations to agree rather than mandates to obey. For instance, we affirm that all war is sin (see the
73 updated Church of the Brethren Statement on War, 1970) and that killing other human beings is
74 unacceptable. We respect those who do not agree and continue in fellowship with them. We preach and
75 teach peace without separating ourselves from those who choose military service or otherwise question
76 the official position of the denomination.

77 The Good Samaritan story teaches us that the measure of our faithfulness is not correct precept or
78 behavior but loving action. It is not whether others behave or think in ways that are right in our eyes
79 which makes them acceptable as our neighbors, but whether we prove to be neighbors to them. In the
80 ministry of reconciliation we are called to love and care for each other before we are called to correct
81 one another. Before we are conservative, liberal, evangelical, progressive, or any one of the many labels
82 we put on one another, we are children of God and brothers and sisters in the church. We are people who
83 love and follow Jesus. We seek to continue his work peacefully, simply, and together. This is what we
84 have to offer to one another and to the world. This is our gift as Brethren.

85 Therefore, in the process of dealing with differences with Annual or District Conference decisions we are
86 guided by the following resolutions contained in the "Resolution Urging Forbearance":

- 87 ● that we commit ourselves to forbearance which recognizes and respects differences of opinion and
88 differing degrees of spiritual insight. We will show deference in disputable matters (Romans 14:1)
89 while practicing prayerful study and conversation in core beliefs;
- 90 ● that we agree to see our differences, not as discord, but as the blessing which can come when we
91 openly discuss our disagreements, address our conflicts, and share our faith perspectives;
- 92 ● that, with our forebears, we continue to treasure both faithfulness to truth and openness to new light;
- 93 ● In all circumstances, we will embrace our commitment to one another as brothers and sisters in
94 Christ as equally important to our other theological beliefs (1 Corinthians 13:1-8; Ephesians 4:32);
- 95 ● that we pledge ourselves on matters where we are not of one mind to let the Holy Spirit draw us
96 together to be of one heart.

97 **PSWD Policy for Dealing with Congregational Differences**

- 98 1. Disagreement with Annual Conference and/or District Conference decisions may exist in many or most
99 congregations. We recognize that differences may exist without contention, however. Where differences
100 exist, continued dialog may take place within the normal structures of district and denominational life.
101 Conversation is encouraged between persons and groups who may see issues from different
102 perspectives, so that they may better understand one another. The purpose of a district response to
103 congregational disagreements with Annual Conference and/or District Conference decisions is to
104 provide direction, support and conciliatory action.
- 105 2. We have strong agreement that Annual Conference is our highest governing authority. We do not see
106 it as a legislative body that makes mandatory laws to govern individual and congregational behavior.
107 It is, rather, a delegate body that gives the representative voice of the community at the time the issue
108 is being discussed. It strives for unanimity, but does not require it. Therefore, when differences arise,
109 we recognize those differences, affirming where we agree while at the same time confessing where we
110 do not agree.
- 111 3. Process for dealing with congregational differences with Annual Conference or District Conference
112 decisions.
 - 113 A. When district leadership becomes aware that a congregation has taken action or is acting in
114 opposition to an Annual Conference and/or District Conference decision in a way that threatens the
115 overall unity and ministry of the district, the congregation will be invited to participate in a
116 discernment process in the spirit of Matthew 18:
 - 117 1. The District Executive will ask to meet with the pastor and/or other congregational leaders in
118 an effort to understand the nature of the disagreement; whether the disagreement has caused
119 brokenness within the congregation; whether any steps have already been taken to facilitate
120 conversation and reconciliation; whether there is willingness on the part of the congregation for
121 wider dialog.

- 122 2. If the District Executive discerns that there is need for a wider dialog with the congregation,
123 meetings will be encouraged in order to complete a more thorough study of the Annual
124 Conference or District Conference action and the congregation's disagreement, asking questions
125 such as: what is the issue being addressed? What can the congregation affirm about the decision?
126 Where does the congregation differ with the decision? Where is there common ground? What
127 does the congregation believe is missing from the decision? What alternative would the
128 congregation propose? The meeting(s) might include the District Executive, Standing
129 Committee representative, District Board of Administration member(s) and/or members of the
130 Shalom Team.
- 131 3. If needed, the District Executive may seek the services of resource persons outside the district,
132 including trained mediators and/or agencies within the denomination, e.g., Ministry of
133 Reconciliation (MOR).
- 134 4. As soon as it is helpful, the District Executive may:
- 135 a. arrange for a mediator, such as: the Shalom Team or Ministry of Reconciliation (MOR), to
136 create a listening session to provide a safe space for individuals across the district to gather
137 to voice and hear different perspectives and to encourage each other in their walk
138 with Christ.
- 139 b. call for the larger district to participate in a day of prayer and fasting to seek the guidance
140 of the Holy Spirit
- 141 5. A study of the topic may be offered as an insight session at District Conference.
- 142 6. After thorough discussion, the congregation may present a query to the District, asking for a
143 re-consideration of the subject of disagreement.
- 144 7. The congregation may place on file a statement describing their disagreement with Annual
145 Conference or the district, their process for deciding on a different position, and their position.
- 146 8. If needed and/or after all attempts at conversation between the congregation and district
147 representatives are unable to bring reconciliation regarding the area of disagreement we ask
148 participants in this process to reaffirm their intent to be faithful to the call to love and care for
149 one another, even in times of differences, acknowledging that we do not seek uniformity, but
150 forbearance and continued conversation with one another as we seek the mind of Christ.
- 151 B. When district leadership becomes aware that relationships between congregations are being
152 adversely affected by an Annual or District Conference decision, many or all of the previous steps
153 may be taken with each congregation.
- 154 1. The District Executive will ask to meet with the pastor and/or other congregational leaders in
155 each congregation (separately) in an effort to understand the nature of the disagreement; whether
156 the disagreement has caused disaffection between the congregations; whether any steps have
157 already been taken to facilitate conversation and reconciliation; whether there is willingness on
158 the part of the congregations for wider dialog.
- 159 2. If the District Executive discerns that there is need for a wider dialog, meetings will be
160 encouraged within the separate congregations in order to complete a more thorough study of the
161 relationship between the congregations, asking questions such as: what is/are the issue(s) being
162 addressed? What can each congregation affirm about the other(s)? Where do the congregations
163 differ with one another? Where is there common ground? What possible solutions would each
164 congregation propose? These meeting(s) might include the District Executive, Standing
165 Committee representative, District Board of Administration member(s) and/or members of the
166 Shalom Team.
- 167 3. The District Executive in conversation with the leaders of each congregation may choose to hold
168 meetings between the congregations for extended conversations around the issues being
169 addressed. Trained mediators may be invited to facilitate the meetings.

- 170 4. The District Executive, in conversation with the leaders of each congregation may determine that
171 further efforts are necessary for mediation between the congregations. Trained mediators may
172 be invited to design and facilitate the process.
- 173 5. Throughout the entire process, the intent should be careful listening and respectful conversation
174 that might lead to common understanding, even if agreement is not reached.
- 175 6. If mediation between congregations is unable to bring reconciliation regarding the area of
176 disagreement, we ask congregations to reaffirm their intent to be faithful to the call to love and
177 care for one another, even in times of differences, acknowledging that we do not seek
178 uniformity, but forbearance and continued conversation with one another as we seek the mind
179 of Christ.
- 180 C. If a congregation is engaged in activities that create liability concerns, or represent threats to the
181 ministry of the district, the Board of Administration may bring the concern and specific
182 recommendations to District Conference for action.
- 183 1. Actions taken by District Conference should fall within the Pacific Southwest Constitution and
184 By-laws and the polity of the Church of the Brethren.
- 185 2. If appropriate, an acknowledgment should be made that the congregation continues supporting
186 the larger church in other aspects of its life while disagreeing with Annual Conference on the
187 particular matter.
- 188 3. The Annual Conference Standing Committee continues to serve as the appeals body.
- 189 4. Finally, in cases of disagreement, we are called to “listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit, working
190 in love to mutually support and encourage our various ministries.” (from the PSWD Unity Statement)

Submitted on October 14, 2011 by the committee: Linda Davis, Jeanine Ewert, Tom Hostetler, Sara Haldeman-Scarr, Doris Dunham, Lois Frantz and Reba Herder. Ex-officio members: PSWD Board Chair Don Fancher, Moderator Karen Walters and District Executive Don Booz.

Action of the Pacific Southwest District Executive Board on October 18, 2011: We recommend the committee’s work for adoption by the Pacific Southwest District Conference on November 12, 2011.