2. Patient Hope in Matters of Conscience

A Recommendation from On Earth Peace

Brethren have a deep heritage of suffering for our beliefs and practices which differ from the prevailing norms, holding prayerful and patient hope of helping believers live lives of greater faithfulness to Christ. Learning from these experiences, the Church of the Brethren has long committed itself to living together with differences in matters of conscience.

This is done with abiding hope and faith that strongly held convictions shared through persistent prayer, conversation, and walking together, in God’s time, will persuade all of us to be of one mind in Christ in matters essential to Brethren discipleship. It is also done with openness to minority voices of conscience which may represent important prophetic nudgings in the church’s spiritual work of discernment.

Church teaching states: “Forbearance does not require one to accept what another believes, but it does require one to listen and try to understand what another believes without demeaning, personal attacks, or acting to disenfranchise the other person.”

Brethren have affirmed a vision to “embrace one another.” Faithfully living with differences in matters of conscience is one of the unique hallmarks of Brethren discipleship to Jesus, providing a needed alternative to the deep polarization and division of American society and giving vibrant witness to the beloved community of Christ.

Once again Brethren have the opportunity to provide this needed witness. The 2016 Annual Conference received four separate yet related queries reflecting matters for which there are deep differences of conscience among Brethren:

- Query: Same Sex Weddings
- Query: On Earth Peace Reportability/Accountability to Annual Conference
- Query: viability of On Earth Peace as an Agency of the Church of the Brethren
- Query: Living Together as Christ Calls

Lacking coordination and without consistent agreement on how forbearance may apply in these matters, three different leadership teams were separately tasked to study and provide recommendations in response to these four queries. Various districts are also independently coming to a variety of decisions regarding these same questions of conscience, resulting in, among other concerns, inconsistent application of the 2004 Annual Conference statement “Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions.”

At the same time, there is a largely unnoticed inconsistency in the practice of living with disagreements in matters of conscience. Large numbers of congregations are routinely granted forbearance on a wide variety of matters in which their conscience will not permit participation in a particular aspect of denominational program or adherence to certain beliefs. For example, the 2008 Annual Conference paper on forbearance states, “Though Annual Conference approved the ordination of women as ministers…, in the spirit of forbearance, we do not take punitive action against those individuals or congregations who refuse to follow that decision.” But this
same patient tolerance is not extended to other congregations who do participate and support a wide range of denominational ministries and values, yet find themselves being called into question on their principled difference of conscience on one particular topic addressed by Annual Conference statements.

Without a consistent practice of forbearance for those who respectfully dissent to some aspects of majority opinion, power may be used as was the case in the state churches of Europe to punish dissent based on conscience, causing loss, division, and lasting harm to longstanding relationships.

Therefore, we the board and staff of On Earth Peace, an agency of the Church of the Brethren, recommend that Annual Conference place further action on these pending items on hold until guidelines are developed that would ensure consistency throughout the church in the practice of patiently living with differences in matters of conscience, so that Brethren can give a witness in this conflict weary world to the hope and joy of following Jesus, peacefully, simply, together.

Chair and Vice Chair
Irvin R. Heishman
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Action of the On Earth Peace Board of Directors: On October 8, 2016, the Board of Directors of On Earth Peace Assembly, Inc. approved submitting this recommendation to the 2017 Annual Conference.