NB 5. Change in Delegate Representation at Annual Conference
A Recommendation from the Leadership Team

Reasons for Proposed Change in Polity

“Annual Conference exists to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.” A primary framework to fulfill this vision for Annual Conference is the calling of delegates by congregations and districts to gather in community for worship, fellowship, discipleship, and to conduct the business of the church.

Our current practice of one congregational delegate for every 200 members or a fraction thereof\(^1\) was established in 1882, in part as an effort to make the Annual Meeting more manageable with regard to size. The practice was revisited in 1947 but remained unchanged.\(^2\)

Standing Committee delegates were elected by districts beginning in 1868. Various modifications to the structure of the committee occurred over the years. In 1980 one delegate for every 6,000 members of a district or fraction thereof created a committee of 44 delegates.\(^3\) In 1988 polity was changed to our current ratio of one delegate for every 5,000 district members or fraction thereof, helping to maintain a Standing Committee of 40+ members.\(^4\)

Decrease in membership across the denomination has resulted in a decrease in the average size of congregations from 161 members in 1980 (170,884 members in 1,062 congregations)\(^5\) to a current 110 members (111,431 members in 1,015 congregations).\(^6\) This decreasing membership also has impacted the number of delegates that districts are eligible to elect to Standing Committee, decreasing the size of Standing Committee to 36 in 2018.

Conversations around decreasing membership often lead us to hold at arm’s length its realities and simply hope for “better times.” The Leadership Team would rather actively walk with this current reality and seek ways to increase the vitality and effectiveness of Annual Conference in our collective life together, and in the life of each congregation that participates (523 of our 1,015 congregations sent delegates in 2017). By changing the delegate/membership ratio we will increase the ability of congregations to contribute to the conversation and decision-making processes, as well as experience the spiritual inspiration and the enriching relationships provided

\(^{1}\) Current polity can be found in Chapter 1, section III.A.3.a.4) of the *Church of the Brethren Manual of Organization and Polity*, December 2016 edition. 1882 Minutes, Article 15.


\(^{6}\) Figures drawn from 2017 *Church of the Brethren Yearbook*, 373-374.
through Annual Conference. As more individuals have opportunity to be part of the full Annual Conference experience, more individuals will return to their congregations having invested themselves into the life of the larger church in a deeper way. We will always work to encourage every congregation to bring their voices to Annual Conference, and we will celebrate our life together with all who join us. Changing the delegate ratio from 1/200 to 1/100 would potentially increase the delegate body by approximately 50%.

It is also important that Standing Committee maintain the number of voices that have served it so well since its inception. A committee of 40-45 has proven to be a good size for healthy debate, accountability, and representation of diverse views. With current membership statistics, changing the ratio of district delegates to Standing Committee from one delegate for every 5,000 members to one delegate for every 4,000 members would mean five additional Standing Committee delegates, for a total of 41 Standing Committee delegates.

With this reasoning, the Leadership Team of the Church of the Brethren recommends to the 2018 Annual Conference that the ratio of delegate representation from congregations be changed from 1 delegate for every 200 to 1 delegate for every 100 members or fraction thereof. We also recommend that the district delegations to Standing Committee be changed from a current ratio of 1 delegate for every 5,000 to 1 delegate for every 4,000 members or fraction thereof.

Action of the Leadership Team: At its meeting on January 27, 2018 and with final approval recorded in the minutes of its March 8, 2018 meeting, the Leadership Team adopted this recommendation to be presented for consideration by the 2018 Annual Conference.

Leadership Team
  David A. Steele, general secretary, chair
  Samuel Kefas Sarpiya, moderator
  Donita J. Keister, moderator-elect
  James M. Beckwith, secretary
  David D. Shetler, Council of District Executives representative
  Chris Douglas, Conference director, staff support