2017 Report of the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives on the Authority of Annual Conference and Districts regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts

The Task

The Leadership Team (which consists of the Annual Conference officers and the general secretary, with the Conference director as staff support) met with the executive committee of the Council of District Executives on November 1-2, 2016, and with the entire Council of District Executives on January 24-26, 2017, to respond to the assignment from the 2016 Annual Conference which referred the concerns of the Query: Same Sex Weddings to the Leadership Team in consultation with the Council of District Executives “to bring clarity and guidance concerning the authority of Annual Conference and districts regarding the accountability of ministers, congregations, and districts, bringing recommendations to the 2017 Annual Conference.”

From the onset, we reviewed the actions taken by the 2016 Conference in response to the query about same-sex weddings. Those actions clearly indicated that we have serious disagreement in the church over how to answer this query. However, we also recognize that the focus of our assignment - the authority of Annual Conference and districts regarding the accountability of ministers, congregations and district - is more complex and pertains not only to same-sex marriage, but also to a host of other Annual Conference statements and positions. We understand that our task is to provide guidance to the church that can be supported by a broad cross section of the delegate body, as we seek to be a faithful church in the midst of widely differing perspectives.

Seeking the Mind of Christ

As the Standing Committee recommendation stated, the Church of the Brethren is not of one mind on a number of issues. Nevertheless, we observe that Brethren at our best are committed to seeking the Mind of Christ together, heeding the instruction of Philippians 2:2-5 (NRSV), “Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” It is this humble eagerness to love one another in the midst of seeking to discern our Lord’s purposes for our life together that attracts people around the world to the Brethren way of following Jesus.

We believe our heritage calls us to continue to work at discerning together, as we read in Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV): “Spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” We encourage the Brethren to not give up on each other, but to trust the Lord to work in this body of Christ as we faithfully witness to the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15) and allow our brothers and sisters to faithfully witness to the hope that is within them, seeking to hold in creative ten-
sion the personal convictions that our commitment to Jesus prompts within us along-
side the corporate convictions we have been able to decide upon in our times of con-
ferring together around God’s Word. Neither should do violence to the other: personal conscience must be faithfully reviewed in the light of our corporate con-
science, and corporate conscience must be faithfully alert to the new light God might want to shed through personal conscience.

The Authority of Annual Conference

We reaffirm our Church of the Brethren polity, which states:

Annual Conference is the highest legislative authority in determining the polity of the church and the final authority of the Church of the Brethren in all matters of procedure, program, polity, and discipline. The authority of Conference has its source in the delegates elected by local churches and districts who come together as a deliberative body under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹

We understand this authority to be carried out in terms of authorizing the things we are able to agree upon together. Annual Conference is the “author” of our identity, our way of following Jesus together. As the first section of chapter 1 of our Manual of Organization and Polity clarifies:

The actions of Conference are directives for the whole life of the church, and implementation is assumed to take place within a reasonable span of time. This implementation does not depend on acts of enforcement by decree. Rather, education, consultation, and patience are characteristics of Brethren polity. Groups and individuals have channels of review when decisions of Annual Conference are questioned. It is important that there be mutual trust and shared responsibility between local, district, and denominational structures of church order.²

The 1968 Annual Conference approved definitions of polity and authority that con-
tinue to shape and mold our life together. They are recorded in the Introduction to the Manual of Organization and Polity and were adopted as the answer to a query about our polity.

The following are basic guidelines in regulating church polity and authority:

1. The highest authority is God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. All human authority is judged with reference to this ultimate standard.

2. Authority is exercised both formally through organizational structures and des-
ignated persons and informally through spontaneous groupings and natural leaders. This authority is to be implemented with respect for individual con-
science, openness to new light, acceptance of criticism, and the willingness to allow decisions to persuade on the basis of their intrinsic merit.
3. Authority is held accountable within the community, which in turn diligently seeks the “mind of Christ” in study of the scriptures, in dialogue with brothers and sisters, and in openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

4. The principles of “voluntaryism” in membership and belief and “no force in religion,” which are firmly rooted in our tradition, make us avoid arbitrary patterns of enforcement which violate the freedom of individuals and local groups.

5. The practice of brothers and sisters confronting each other is an essential part of our serving as a “priest to one another.” Our Anabaptist heritage teaches that “no one enters the kingdom apart from our brothers and sisters.” This leads us to reject unqualified individualism, which denies the place of the community in the shaping of one’s life of discipleship.

Openness to our brothers and sisters reaches from the local congregation to the district, to the denomination, to the ecumenical church. Administrative structures must constantly be measured by this criterion: Do they make possible full and free interchange between brothers and sisters in Christ as the collective means for coming to know God’s will for the church?3

The Authority of the District

Beyond this polity which establishes the authority of Annual Conference, we would clarify that our polity gives authority to districts as defined by the recommended district constitution, which can be found in chapter 3 of the Manual of Organization and Polity. Specifically, that proposed constitution states:

District Conference is the final authority of the district on policy, program, and procedure.4

In addition, chapter 5 of the Manual of Organization and Polity makes clear that the district has authority for the credentialing of ministers:

All licensed, commissioned and ordained ministers are accountable to both the district and the denomination. Annual Conference charges districts with the responsibility of credentialing ministers in the Church of the Brethren, and the denominational Office of Ministry works to resource and support districts in this process.5

That chapter also gives the district responsibility to conduct a credential review and outlines the reasons for which a credential may be terminated. Such authority is to be exercised in the spirit of love and reconciliation revealed to us through Jesus, who commands us to love one another as he has first loved us (John 13:34). Time and again Annual Conference has given this advice in response to queries about holding accountable those whose teachings or practices differed from other Brethren. The 1979 statement on “Biblical Inspiration and Authority” describes the kind of loving
forbearance that helps us hold each other accountable for seeking the truths of God together:

Christian love requires:
- that we acknowledge the integrity and worth of those brothers and sisters with whom we cannot totally agree.
- that we make every effort to understand one another by keeping lines of communication open, by listening to, hearing, and responding to our sisters/brothers.
- that we be willing to test our perceptions and understandings with the gathered church.
- that we be open to the counsel of our brothers and sisters.
- that we behave in ways that build up the church.
- that we be obedient to Jesus Christ.
- that we not attempt to gloss over our differences, but that we face them honestly and work at resolving them “with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2-3).
- that we hold before us the goal of “being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2).6

**Mutual Accountability**

We are called to respect individual conscience through forbearance, even as we are also called to seek confirmation of God’s guidance through corporate discernment. The 1998 Annual Conference affirmed that holding the New Testament as our rule of faith and practice:

… continues to call us to a life of study and conversation that places [the] collective understanding and spiritual insight [of] the voice of the Brethren above individual interpretation. This process of collective discernment accepts the Bible as God’s Word, while focusing upon Christ as the center of our faith, and praying for the Holy Spirit’s guidance of our study and conversation. … moves us as a faith community towards a respectful manner of conversation that recognizes there will be differences, but points us toward a higher expectation that there will be agreed-upon understandings and practices that reflect our unity in Jesus Christ.7

The 1966 Annual Conference statement “The Theological Basis of Personal Ethics” further describes the spirit by which we hold individual leaders accountable to the decisions we have discerned together while respecting the individual conscience and convictions the Lord is calling forth within them:

Honest Christians may well differ about the claim of God in a particular situation. In such cases we need to exercise charity and patience, remembering that we are not our brother’s final judge. Such forbearance need not lead us to abandon the attempt to find group consensus and thus to leave morality to individual decision alone. Although many variations are to be found in the New
Testament, it is full of accounts of those who sought a consensus in the Lord’s will for them. Those who live in His Spirit will seek consensus without forcing their views upon one another.  

While the district is clearly given authority to grant and to remove ministerial credentials, such decisions are not to be taken lightly. We do not terminate a credential because of variant opinion or conviction, but in response to behavior which is destructive to the community of faith.

None of this review of polity indicates any change from the guidance already given by previous Annual Conference decisions with regard to the authority of Annual Conference and the authority of districts. It is simply a review of the agreements by which we have decided to work together as a body of Christ.

Accountability of Congregations

One further aspect of our assignment was to give clarity and guidance to the authority of Annual Conference and districts regarding the accountability of congregations. The Congregational Ethics Polity section of Chapter 4 of the Manual of Organization and Polity describes the congregational accountability for ethical behavior that was adopted by Annual Conference in 2014. The Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions section of that same chapter and the parallel section of chapter 3 describe the accountability of congregations and the authority of districts in working through disagreements, as recommended by Annual Conference in 2004.

We would clarify that while the paper on congregational disagreements with Annual Conference decisions is “not intended as polity to be applied unilaterally throughout the denomination for each individual case,” it was nevertheless adopted as a policy by which districts should measure the policies or polity that they adopt. As the 2004 action by Annual Conference states:

Each district is encouraged to put in place framework for processing a congregational disagreement with an Annual Conference action, in keeping with these suggestions. The process should be flexible enough to allow for the wide variations of each case, yet specific enough that it has accountability and direction. Each district should establish such a process prior to the recognition of the need for said process. The goal of the district response process should be to help the congregation move to an understanding of the Annual Conference action and willingness to support the action, or at least a willingness to refrain from taking any action that would be interpreted as being defiant or insubordinate. If this goal is unattainable and there is a lack of reconciliation, an acknowledgement should be made that the congregation continues supporting the larger church in other aspects of its life while disagreeing with Annual Conference in the particular matter. It is expected that reconciliation attempts will continue.
Annual Conference therefore delegates authority to the district for holding congregations accountable, since congregations are expected “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” and to carry out their “ethical responsibility to support the denomination.” Annual Conference expects the district, however, to wield its authority in a spirit of seeking the mind of Christ together: “The goal of the … process is to find God’s truth together in a respectable Christian community.”

Call to Live in Accordance with Polity

We therefore call the Church of the Brethren to live in accordance with the polity that calls us to seek the mind of Christ together, in humble acknowledgment that as we seek to be as decisive as possible in affirming what we believe the Lord has helped us to discover together thus far, we must nevertheless confess that we have not yet learned all that the Lord intends to help us learn together. We are not yet where we ought to be in our Christian discipleship, and we desire to help each other confess what the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:12-14 (NIV), “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Scripture teaches that the day will come when sheep and goats are separated according to faithfulness to Jesus. But for now we live in the reality of the parable of the wheat and the tares and continue to witness to each other and to the world that the Lord is mightily at work in the convictions we share and the mission we carry out together in the midst of our ongoing deliberations.

Our heritage calls us to live constantly in the creative tension of being both Pietists and Anabaptists, emphasizing orthopraxis as well as orthodoxy (right practice and right thinking), affirming the whole of the New Testament as our creed, encouraging each other to put its teachings into practice in every aspect of our lives. The command of the Lord Jesus that we love one another as he has loved us explains that we are to lay down our lives for our friends (John 15:12-13). We are given to each other to be friends, more than that, to be brothers and sisters in the family of God. Therefore, we will care for each other and earnestly seek to understand those whose experiences of life are different from our own, including those whose convictions place them in the minority of our church family. We will practice open-hearted listening. We will allow others to approach us, to feel safe in sharing with us from the depths of their souls. We will simply care enough about each other to act with compassion and be gracious at all times towards one another, steadfastly encouraging each other to enter into “works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13 NIV).
Accountability of Ministers

At this time, ministers and congregations are not authorized by Annual Conference to perform same sex weddings. A majority of the delegate body is clearly opposed to homosexual covenantal relationships. A significant minority disagrees with this decision. This circumstance is similar to how we experience other issues where a majority supports a decision Annual Conference has made, but a loyal minority raises objections based on faithful convictions such as our decisions about biblical inspiration and authority, women in ministry, and commitments to peacemaking. We will continue to search the scriptures, seeking to find the mind of Christ together. We acknowledge that Christ calls us to live together as one body, centered in Christ in a life of grace. We will not take lightly decisions that will terminate an individual’s ministerial credentials or disorganize a congregation.16

The officiating of same sex weddings by credentialed clergy shall be handled in the same way as any other report of ministerial conduct: if a district executive minister receives a report based on direct knowledge that a minister has performed a same gender marriage, the information shall be reported to the district’s credentialing body as a matter of ministerial conduct.17 It will continue to be the standard practice among district executives that districts respect decisions concerning ministerial misconduct and removal of ordinations by other districts.

Accountability of Districts

Districts are strongly encouraged to review their policies, processes and procedures to ensure that they are in harmony with Annual Conference actions and decisions, replacing or removing these policies, processes, and procedures as necessary. We urge districts to work at discipline in a redemptive rather than a punitive spirit, considering the full life and faithfulness of the parties involved.

Call to Continue the Work of Jesus

We will pray with and show grace to those who feel they must leave our fellowship, but we believe that the Lord is calling us to work together to carry out ministries of vital importance, both domestically and globally. Making disciples and growing as disciples of Jesus is our mission. Led by the Holy Spirit, we continue the work of Jesus peacefully, simply, together.

To stay on the journey together, it is also crucial that the church discern the compelling vision that this body of Christ is called to pursue. This will be a matter of further work by the Leadership Team and Council of District Executives.

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Action of the 2017 Annual Conference: Annual Conference adopted the recommendations from the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives that this statement of clarification about our current polity and standard practice be received as the answer to our assignment and that the church turn its attention to the framing of a compelling vision for how we will continue the work of Jesus together. The report was received by the delegate body with one correction and two additional endnotes that were announced by the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives prior to their recommendation that the report be received. Those changes have been incorporated into the report as it is printed in these minutes.

Annual Conference also approved the officers’ recommendation that the “Questions and Answers” and “Introductory Statement” documents for this item of business be included in these minutes.