



Church of the Brethren

# MANUAL OF ORGANIZATION AND POLITY

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Annual Conference  
Church of the Brethren  
1451 Dundee Avenue  
Elgin, Illinois 60120  
[www.brethren.org/ac](http://www.brethren.org/ac)

# CHAPTER 4

## THE LOCAL CHURCH

### I. CONGREGATIONAL STRUCTURE<sup>1</sup>

#### A. ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTION

Preliminary to any plan of local church organization is an understanding of the mission of the church. This mission, set forth in the great commission, though never fully understood, may be defined as having an inner and an outer direction. The inner mission of the church is to nurture its members, seeking ever to bring them more and more to the stature of maturity in Christ. The outer mission of the church is to be related, as God's instrument, to the problems and the needs of the world. These two major functions of the church are achieved to the extent that they are undergirded with stewardship of time, talent, and material resources.

The congregation is a basic unit of the church at work in the world. Servants of the Lord must be alert to the needs and the opportunities about them. They must make their ministry relevant to the changing times and should always be creative in communicating the Word and the love of God.

To these ends each local congregation should develop its own articles of incorporation (where applicable), constitution, and bylaws, clearly defining its organizational structure and working procedures in harmony with Church of the Brethren and district polity. Articles of incorporation are the formal legal document filed with the state of incorporation. A constitution is regarded as a statement of the fundamental principles of government adopted by the church. The bylaws are detailed rules and regulations which allow for the effective working of the congregation within its basic principles and procedures to be incorporated into a local church plan of organization. This organizational plan is a model only and should not necessarily be taken as legal articles of incorporation. If the church is to be duly incorporated by the state in which it is located, the congregation shall consult the district office for proper compliance to state corporation laws.

#### B. ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

Articles of Incorporation should provide the information required by the state of incorporation. It is usually preferable that the articles contain only information required by state law.

#### C. SUGGESTED CONSTITUTION

(While a constitution is not legally required for an incorporated congregation, it has often been used even by such a congregation to designate fundamental positions. If a constitution is not used, the kinds of information described in this section may be contained in the bylaws.)

##### 1. Name of the Congregation

The local church shall have an official name. The church is deserving of a Christian name.

## 2. Affirmation of Faith and Purpose

This congregation:

- a. is founded upon the faith that there is but one God who is a personal God who in holy love creates, sustains, and orders all.
- b. confesses Jesus Christ as the Lord of the church and of all life.
- c. believes that the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts and minds of believers, creating and sustaining the church through the gospel, giving guidance and comfort, and uniting believers with their Lord and with one another.
- d. maintains the New Testament as its only creed and rule of faith. In the Holy Scriptures is recorded God's search for all persons which is climaxed in God's redemptive act in and through Christ. Through the Bible God still speaks and continues to accomplish God's redemptive purposes.
- e. believes that the gospel is the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Through the gospel God's sovereign will and Christ's redeeming grace are revealed.
- f. holds that the church is the body of Christ and is under the Lord's mandate to be faithful in accepting and transmitting the gospel by word and deed.
- g. considers that all members of the congregation, of the body of believers, are responsible for the total ministry of the church.
- h. accepts the ministry of the church to be the proclamation and fulfillment of the gospel for all people both near and far, and the nurture of the individual believers in the Christian faith and life.

## 3. Mission and Vision Statements

The congregation should discern, develop, and implement mission and vision statements. The mission statement defines the primary purpose of the church, why the congregation exists, and their understanding of what God is calling them to be. The vision statement defines the specific ministries to which the congregation understands God to be calling them, what God is calling them to do. The mission statement should be reviewed at least every five years and the vision statement every three years.

## 4. Relationship to the Whole Church

### a. The church universal

The local church is part of a larger whole, which comprises the complete body of Christ. The local church, therefore, shall recognize other Christian bodies and denominations and shall seek to cooperate with and give direction to the united efforts of the church.

### b. The church denominational<sup>2</sup>

The congregation shall covenant 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 shall remain a member of the Church of the Brethren or its successor. The congregation shall send delegates to those official conferences of the Church of the Brethren in which it is entitled to have representation. In case of strife or division, if any part of the congregation refuses to abide by its obligation as a member of the Church of the Brethren, that part of the congregation, whether a majority or minority of its membership, which continues in unity with the Church of the Brethren shall be recognized as the lawful

congregation and shall continue in possession of all the property of the congregation.

If the congregation (a) disbands, (b) departs from membership in the Church of the Brethren, or (c) so decreases in numbers and financial strength as to render the congregation unable to fulfill its purpose, the district of the Church of the Brethren in which it is located, or the successor, shall have the right to take charge and control of all property and thereafter to hold, manage, and convey the same at the discretion of the district. All action taken by the district relating to the property of a congregation shall be in conformity with the provisions of this Church of the Brethren *Manual of Organization and Polity* (chapter 6 of this manual, “Property Holdings and Financial Resources”).

## 5. Membership<sup>3</sup>

### a. Meaning of membership

According to the New Testament, life in Christ means life in the body of Christ. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13), so that we, “though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (Rom. 12:5). Membership in a local fellowship of believers, the congregation, is the way in which we affirm and live out our membership in Christ’s larger body, the church universal. In our interrelatedness with other Christians in the local church, we experience the fullness of the gifts of the Spirit, we discover ways to be faithful to our covenant with God and each other, and we’re able to support one another in carrying out our common calling as the people of God. So it was in the house churches of the earliest Christians; and so it is in the life of God’s people today.

From the time of its beginnings, the Church of the Brethren has affirmed the importance of church membership and sought ways to make church membership more meaningful. It is appropriate, therefore, for the congregation and its members to reflect on their mutual accountability to one another. On the one hand, the congregation has a covenantal responsibility to care for its members, to encourage growth in freedom and discipleship, to help members discover their gifts and find ways to serve, and to provide ministries which respond to both spiritual and physical needs. On the other hand, each member has a covenantal responsibility to participate regularly in the life of the congregation, to seek the counsel of the church in living out the way of Christ, to challenge the church to greater accountability to its calling, to respond to opportunities to serve in the congregation and beyond, and to contribute to the church’s ministries in every way possible. Congregations may use these general guidelines as a basis for developing more specific expectations for their membership.

At the heart of our calling as members of Christ’s body is the summons to follow Christ as his disciples. Christians do not live unto themselves but are called to seek first the kingdom of God, to risk themselves for Christ’s sake, and to take up the way of the cross. To accept and practice the costly grace of radical discipleship is no easy task. In the community of faith, however, we find courage and strength to live out our discipleship in solidarity with others.

### b. Entering into and renewing church membership

Membership in the local church is open to all persons who by their own act of faith say yes to God’s offer of new life in Christ and accept the vocation of the covenant community, as taught and practiced by the Church of the Brethren. One of the responsibilities of the congregation is to reach out to people irrespective of race, national origin, or status in life, to share with them the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and to invite them to enter into the life of Christ’s body.

When persons respond to this invitation, the church shall take steps to prepare them for

membership. Part of this preparation should consist of classes of sufficient length on the meaning of church membership. Such classes offer an opportunity for persons to explore the faith and history of the wider Christian community, to study the particular story and distinctive emphases of the Church of the Brethren, and to become familiar with the life and expectations of the congregation they will be entering. In addition to providing membership classes, the congregation may choose to identify persons who will serve as sponsors of new members to assist in their orientation into the life of the church. In whatever ways the congregation chooses to prepare persons for membership, the pastor or minister has a key role to play here.

When persons seeking membership have completed their period of preparation, the deacons shall recommend them for membership in the congregation.<sup>4</sup> Following a congregational confirmation of acceptance as members, persons may be received into the church in one of three ways:

- 1) Confession of faith and baptism by trine immersion as practiced by the Church of the Brethren.
- 2) A letter transferring membership from another congregation of the Church of the Brethren or of another Christian denomination.
- 3) Reaffirmation of faith and renewal of the commitment to membership made at an earlier time in another congregation.

Whatever the particular mode of reception, the act of receiving new members should be a festive moment in the life of a congregation. It is a time for old and new members to affirm their relationship with one another, a time to celebrate the joys and responsibilities of living in covenant in Christ's body, and a time to lift up the lifelong process of growth to which baptism should lead.

The sequel to entering into membership is the renewing of membership. Only as we regularly renew our covenant with God and with one another does that covenant function in a vital way. Historically, Brethren worked at renewal of membership through an annual visit by the deacons to the homes of members to reflect on the health of each person's relationship with Christ and the church—and through the love feast, which traditionally followed that visit. Whether through its practice or through other models of calling one another to accountability, the congregation shall provide its members with annual opportunities to examine their faith and calling and to renew or reaffirm their relationship with the church. As a part of this process, members may be invited to make specific commitments related to their participation in the life and work of the church.

c. Membership classification

Members shall be classified in one of three ways for statistical purposes and reported accordingly on annual report forms:

1) Members

Members of the congregation shall consist of those people who have been received into the church by baptism, letter, or reaffirmation of the faith, and who choose to continue their membership when the congregation invites them to examine and renew the covenant relationship, thereby confirming their intention to fulfill the responsibilities of members as described above.

In congregations that are aligned with two or more denominations, members shall be regarded as full members of each of the related denomination, nurtured in and oriented to

the traditions of each church, and encouraged to enrich one another through their differences, seeking strength and unity together. Annual report forms shall provide a way for such congregations to identify their multiple affiliation, so that statistics on membership and giving can be understood in the light of dual or multiple commitments.

2) Associate members

Congregations may grant associate membership to two categories of people:

- a) temporary residents, such as students and winter residents who participate in the life of a congregation on a seasonal or short-term basis, and who continue to hold membership in another congregation in the community of their permanent residence.
- b) former residents, persons who have moved to a new location in which there is no Church of the Brethren, and who wish to continue a relationship with the Brethren at the same time that they become members of another Christian community.

Associate members have the right to vote and hold office in the congregation granting their associate status and have a responsibility to contribute resources to support the ministries of that congregation. Associate members are not eligible to serve on the leadership team or to represent the congregation as delegates to district or Annual Conferences. (For more detailed guidelines on the rights and responsibilities of associate members, see Section III.2. of the 1985 Annual Conference Membership Study Committee report.)

3) Separated members

Separated members consist of those persons who were received into the church as members, but who no longer participate in the church's life or carry out the commitments expected of members, and who for three consecutive years fail to respond to invitations to reaffirm or renew their relationship with the congregation. Whether the causes of separation have to do with the individual, the congregation, or both, the congregation shall continue to explore ways to restore the broken relationship. Guidelines for working at reconciliation and restoration may be found in the "the Shalom Team Model"<sup>5</sup> for responding to conflicts in congregations and the wider church. For statistical purposes, members whose residence is unknown and cannot be ascertained for three consecutive years will also be designated as separated members.

d. Membership termination

Membership in a congregation of the Church of the Brethren may be terminated in one of the following ways:

- 1) Death
- 2) Transfer of membership by letter. A letter of transfer is the property of the congregation and shall go from the granting to the receiving congregation. Either the letter or accompanying note should indicate whether the member for whom the letter is being sent is a member or separated member.
- 3) Withdrawal. This action shall be taken by the congregation at the written request of the individual.
- 4) Removal. The congregation may act to remove a person's name from the list of members when:
  - a) a member has joined another church, but failed to request a letter of transfer.

b) the congregation determines that all attempts at reconciliation have failed.

6. Congregational Forum

In the Church of the Brethren, the congregational forum is understood to be the final authority and governing body within the local congregation; it is the church in business session. The congregational forum shall be a place of open dialogue where members hear reports, discuss new ideas, envision and approve goals, evaluate past accomplishments, make decisions for future direction, and record the voice of the congregation on current issues where Christian witness is urgent. Names used for this gathering should reflect the congregation's understanding of itself and might include congregational forum, congregational business meeting, church council, or congregational gathering.

The congregational forum shall call officers, deacons, ministry team chairs, a pastoral relations team member, and the two at-large members of the gifts discernment team. The congregational forum shall also adopt budgets, rule on policy and organizational matters, and authorize church officials to act on behalf of the congregation. Separated members shall not be eligible to participate and vote in the congregational forum. The congregational forum should strive for prayerful consensus and unity in its decision-making.

7. Officers of the Church

The officers of the congregational forum shall be the moderator, the church clerk, the treasurer, and the chair of the leadership team (who also serves as assistant moderator).

The congregational forum officers shall make decisions on behalf of the leadership team at their direction or in emergency situations between regularly scheduled leadership team meetings. Decisions of the congregational forum officers shall be made by consensus. If consensus cannot be achieved, the decision must be made by the leadership team.

8. Legal Officers/Trustees

Local congregations need to identify and empower legal officers/trustees as required by the state in which the congregation is located.

9. Leadership Team

There shall be a leadership team consisting of the leadership team chair, chairs of the ministry teams, and the moderator, who serves as vice chair. The pastor(s), the church clerk, the deacon chair, and the treasurer shall be ex officio without vote.

The leadership team shall be invested with administrative powers to plan, coordinate, integrate, and supervise the ongoing program of the congregation. The leadership team is primarily responsible for program, long-range planning, initiation or discontinuation of programs, and the setting of goals and objectives. The leadership team shall be empowered to act on behalf of the congregational forum ad interim, except for those actions specifically reserved for the congregational forum as set forth in this constitution and bylaws.

The leadership team is accountable to the congregational forum. The leadership team shall assure that the mission and vision of the congregation are fulfilled by encouraging and empowering the development of new ministries by individuals and groups and also by evaluating existing ministries and modifying or discontinuing them. These ministries shall aid in fulfilling the mission and vision of the congregation and shall be faithful to the Church of the Brethren heritage and its understanding of the New Testament as the rule of faith and practice.



The chair of the leadership team shall be called for a three-year term by the congregational forum. The moderator shall serve as vice chair and the church clerk as secretary of the leadership team. The leadership team shall strive for prayerful consensus and unity in its decision-making.

#### 10. Ministry Teams

Ministry teams shall be created by the congregational forum and are accountable to the leadership team. Each team shall be composed of three or more members, including a chair called by the congregational forum. Other ministry team members shall be called by the leadership team and the gifts discernment team. The moderator, leadership team chair, and the pastor(s) shall be ex officio members without vote on all ministry teams. Each ministry team shall choose from its membership a vice chair and secretary.

As needed, depending upon the workload and the size of the congregation, additional ministry teams or short-term project groups shall be created to carry out specific assignments. The number of ministry teams will be based on the identified core functions of the congregation.

In smaller congregations, if there are fewer than four voting members on the leadership team, ministry teams need not be created as such, in which case the leadership team shall function as a whole, delegating various responsibilities among its members. In this case, all leadership team members, including the chair, the moderator, the church clerk, the deacon chair, the treasurer, and the pastor, shall be voting members.

#### 11. Deacons<sup>6</sup>

Deacons may be called for a term or for a continuing succession of three- to five-year terms. After each three- to five-year period of ministry, opportunity should be given for deacons to review their ministry experience. Following a positive review and affirmation, the deacon may enter into another period of ministry.

The deacon body's central interest is the spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being of the church family. Its duties differ significantly from the tasks of ministry teams, whose responsibilities are expressed in programs aimed to support, nurture, teach, and direct the ministry and mission of all the congregation. In contrast, the deacons serve as caregivers of the congregational members.

Congregations determine the number of deacons needed to meet their needs. When deacons' duties include a caregiving ministry to every household in the congregation, a suggested guide is one deacon caregiver for every ten active households.<sup>7</sup>

The deacons shall serve as the membership team. They shall recommend individuals for membership. They shall consult with the pastor(s) regarding the listing, classification, reporting, and termination of membership.

The deacons shall receive the names for the at-large positions on the gifts discernment team and shall discern, call, and present the people to the congregational forum for affirmation.

The deacons shall appoint a deacon representative to serve on the pastoral relations team.

The deacon body chair serves as a member of the leadership team by virtue of office without vote. The deacon body representative serves as a member of the gifts discernment team with vote. A deacon body representative also serves on the pastoral relations team. The deacon body is accountable to the congregational forum, to which it will report directly.

The office of deacon is a congregational office and does not automatically transfer when a deacon moves to a new congregation. The call to participate in the deacon body comes as a decision of

the congregational forum based on the individual's qualifications and the needs of the congregation.

## 12. Gifts Discernment Team

The gifts discernment team shall:

- a. oversee the gifts discernment process and talent/interest/skill inventories.
- b. keep accurate records of member profiles.
- c. serve as a consultative group to church leadership in securing people for ministries in the church.
- d. develop descriptions for every position in the church using a standardized form to include position, title, term, tenure, group to whom accountable, budget resources, duties, and appointments.
- e. oversee the calling of the congregational forum officers, the deacons, the chairs of the ministry teams, the two at-large members of the gifts discernment team, a pastoral relations team member, and delegates to district and Annual Conference using the following process:
  - 1) At least six weeks prior to the congregational call, the gifts discernment team shall announce the positions needing to be filled and their corresponding responsibilities.
  - 2) During that six-week period, the gifts discernment team shall be responsible for educating the congregation on discernment of spiritual gifts and the call process.
  - 3) The moderator shall convene a congregational forum following a Sunday morning worship service, at which time the gifts discernment team shall distribute a blank ballot with a listing of positions to be filled.
  - 4) Names of ineligible persons (church officers and leadership team members serving unexpired terms) shall be shared with the congregation.
  - 5) After a time of prayer and discernment, the members of the congregation shall be instructed to write the name of the person they believe should be called to each position which is open.
  - 6) The gifts discernment team shall receive these names and, based upon these names from the congregational forum, the spiritual gifts inventory, and prayer, issue a call on behalf of the congregation to the individual for the position.
  - 7) The deacons shall receive the names for the at-large positions on the gifts discernment team and shall discern, call, and present the persons to the congregational forum for affirmation.
  - 8) When all positions are filled through this process, the persons who have accepted the call for their respective positions will be affirmed by the congregational forum.
  - 9) In the event of an unclear call or a call that is not accepted, the gifts discernment team, after consultation with the leadership team, shall issue the call to another individual.
- f. in the event of a vacancy, together with the leadership team, appoint a person to fill the unexpired term;
- g. serve as the congregational contact team for district and denominational groups responsible for calling leaders. This team shall have the responsibility for suggesting persons for district and denominational leadership;

- h. consist of the following people: pastor or member of the pastoral team, moderator (shall serve as chair), a deacon body representative, two at-large members (one woman, one man). The at-large members shall serve three years with staggered terms. All members of the gifts discernment team shall serve with vote.

### 13. Pastoral Relations Team

The pastoral relations team shall:

- a. meet with the pastor(s) quarterly, or more often as needed, in an advisory capacity and serve in maintaining good ministerial relations with the congregation.
- b. not fulfill administrative functions. Administrative functions, such as negotiating contracts and salaries, will be the responsibility of the leadership team.
- c. consult with the pastor(s) regarding vacations, professional growth, and training opportunities.
- d. consult with the pastor(s) regarding requests from outside individuals or groups for special appeals, programs, services, or other community or wider church involvements.
- e. assist the pastor(s) in coordinating and giving balance to the various program aspects within the congregation's organizational structure.
- f. consist of one person appointed by the leadership team, one person appointed by the pastor(s), a deacon representative appointed by the deacon body, one person called for a two-year term by the congregational forum. (A second term may be served.) The appointed persons shall serve an indefinite term until replacement or resignation.

### 14. Short-term Project Groups

The congregational forum, the leadership team, or ministry teams may constitute or authorize short-term project groups to carry out specific assignments. Such groups may also be constituted by a group or individual within the congregation if the project to be done, as discerned by the leadership team, falls within the stated mission/vision and policies of the congregation. When the specific assignment is achieved, the project group shall be dismissed. Short-term project groups are accountable to the ministry team constituting them or to the leadership team.

### 15. Records<sup>8</sup>

- a. Official documents

The following official documents related to the ongoing activities of the congregation shall be preserved:

- 1) Deeds, contracts, and other legal and governing documents.
- 2) Minutes of the congregational forum, leadership team, ministry teams, project groups, and other active groups within the congregation.
- 3) Records of members, including name, date received into membership, and date and reason for removal from roll; of ordinations, baptisms, weddings, deaths; worship and Sunday school attendance; annual statistical reports; financial statements; significant correspondence by and to called, appointed, and employed officers that documents congregational program and activity.
- 4) Publications, such as weekly worship bulletins, newsletters, bulletins or programs for special events, directories, books, pamphlets, and brochures published by the

congregation.

b. Ownership of records

All correspondence and records created by people called or employed to act on behalf of the congregation while acting in that capacity are the property of the congregation held in trust for the use and benefit of the Church of the Brethren. Congregations are urged to arrange for the responsible and safe care of their records and documents.

c. Transfer of records

Church records no longer in active use may be transferred by action of the congregation to a depository approved by the district board, where they can be protected from damage by fire and where, under proper restrictions, they may be open to examination.

Attention is called to the Brethren Historical Library and Archives at Elgin and to each of the Brethren college libraries as appropriate depositories for church records.

16. Structuring and Restructuring Congregations

The district board through its appropriate commission shall direct the work of church extension through the development of new fellowships and congregations, the growth of existing ones, and the receiving of unrelated congregations. When needed, guidance shall be given to the merging or disorganizing of congregations.<sup>9</sup> Procedures to be followed in organizing and dividing congregations have been summarized as follows:

a. Organization of new congregations

A body of members or the district board through its appropriate commission may call for organization when, in the judgment of the said commission, conditions of the place from which the call comes justify such organization. Area councils of churches should be notified and their counsel sought and considered.

The call for organization shall be in charge of the district board through its appropriate commission. A moderator shall be selected by the responsible commission. The commission shall provide assistance and counsel in establishing a plan of organization. It shall also assist the organizing congregation in the election of such officials as may be deemed advisable.

The new organization shall then be reported to the district conference, and after its acceptance as fellowship or congregation by that district conference, its delegates shall be seated in the district conference.

b. Merging organized congregations

When two or more congregations desire to merge, they shall seek the counsel and assistance of the district board. After procedural details have been determined regarding property and other assets, liabilities, organization, and identity, and a plan of merger has been approved by the congregations and the district board, the board shall recommend the merger to the district conference. Following acceptance of the merger, the new congregation shall be received and its delegates seated.

c. Dividing organized congregations

If a majority of an organized congregation decides to divide into more than one Church of the Brethren congregation, the congregation shall notify the district board of that decision and the date of the congregational forum to determine lines, division of church property, etc., and to elect a moderator for each of the new congregations and other officers, if deemed advisable. The district board shall then send at least one member of the appropriate district commission

to the meeting to assist the congregation in those tasks. The new organization(s) shall be reported to district conference and recognition obtained, after which the delegates of the newly formed congregation(s) shall be seated.

If the report of the district board favoring the new organization is rejected by the congregation, the district board may, if deemed advisable, organize the petitioners as outlined above, provided two-thirds of the petitioners support the new organization.

If the report of the district board is unfavorable to the petitioners, they shall be counseled to work in harmony with all the other members in a spirit of love for the best interests of the congregation and to exercise patience until such time as conditions may be more favorable.

d. Disorganizing congregations

Requests for disorganization of a congregation shall be made to the district board. The board shall appoint a committee to consider the request. This committee shall examine the circumstances of this request, consider carefully the spiritual welfare of all involved, and report their findings to the board. Upon receiving this report, the board shall determine the advisability of such disorganization and make a recommendation to district conference. If the recommendation is approved by the conference, the district board shall arrange for a transfer of membership of the then-remaining members of the congregation. The district board shall also recommend to district conference a plan for the use or disposition of the property of the disorganizing congregation according to the guidelines in this manual's chapter 6, "Property Holdings and Financial Resources."

Special care shall be taken to ensure that the official records of the congregation as listed above are transferred to the district. In addition, related information on the life of the disorganizing congregation, if available, should be transferred to the district. Such information may include...

- 1) photographs taken in connection with special events or collected from members;
- 2) newspaper and periodical articles documenting church activities;
- 3) manuscript histories of the congregation or any of its sub-units or activities;
- 4) information about special achievements or honors attained by the pastor or lay members;
- 5) biographical material on the minister(s) and other church leaders;
- 6) artifacts connected with the history of the church.

## **D. SUGGESTED BYLAWS**

### **1. Personnel Selection and Tenure**

- a. The gifts discernment team shall maintain a personnel file indicating the interest, giftedness, and record of service of all members. This team shall develop a process for discerning spiritual gifts of all the members of the congregation and find appropriate ways to use those gifts for the ministry and mission of the church. The team shall oversee the calling of individuals for special duties in the church, such as the officers of the congregation, members of the leadership team, deacons, delegates to district and Annual Conferences, and other positions required by the congregational forum.
- b. The term of office for all officers of the congregational forum shall be three years. Officers shall not be eligible to serve more than two terms in succession.

- c. The term of office for the chairs of the ministry teams shall be three years. They shall not be eligible to serve more than two terms in succession. The other members of the ministry teams shall have a term of two years. They shall not be eligible to serve more than three terms in succession. If any leadership team or ministry team member is absent from meetings without cause for six months, that office shall be declared vacant.
- d. Approximately one-third of the membership of the leadership team and one-half of the ministry team members shall be called in any one year.

## **2. Employed Staff**

### **a. Pastor(s)**

The congregation shall employ a pastor(s) when needed, a person whose faith, aptness to teach, preach, counsel, and administer, and educational qualifications have been examined in consultation with the appropriate authorities in the Church of the Brethren.

The pastor(s) shall be properly ordained.<sup>10</sup> (In special interim situations a licentiate, or a minister from another denomination, may serve upon approval by the district board.) The pastor(s) shall accept and adhere to the faith and the practices of the Church of the Brethren and the local congregation as set forth in this constitution. The pastor's life and conduct shall witness to Christian faith.

The pastor(s) shall be the spiritual shepherd of the congregation and the executive director of the church program. The pastor(s) shall be an ex officio member of the leadership team, ministry teams, and project groups as needed. Normally the pastor(s) shall preach and teach, administer the ordinances, visit and counsel, and in various other ways aid the congregation in worshiping and serving God.

### **b. Additional professional staff**

When the congregation has grown to sufficient size, the employment of additional trained staff shall be considered so as to assure the continued growth of the congregation and to provide adequate leadership for the congregation. Other staff members suggested are: a director of Christian education, a director of Christian witness, an associate pastor, a minister of music, an administrative assistant, a congregational visitor, a youth minister, or others.

### **c. Office secretary**

The local church shall provide secretarial assistance for the pastor(s) and the church office. Part-time secretarial assistance shall be provided until such time as the workload requires full-time service.

### **d. Custodian**

Custodial services shall be provided for the care and supervision of the church buildings and grounds.

## **3. Staff Employment Procedures**

- a. The selection and call of a pastor(s) and other professional staff, as well as the termination of their services to the congregation, shall be done in keeping with approved Church of the Brethren procedures and after seeking consultation and guidance of authorized officials of the Church of the Brethren.

A two-thirds majority vote of the members present and voting in a duly called congregational forum shall be regarded sufficient to express the will of the congregation in extending a call

or in voting to continue the leadership of a pastor.

- b. The office secretary shall be employed by the leadership team in consultation with the pastor(s). The office secretary shall be responsible to the pastor(s).
- c. The custodian shall be employed by and be responsible to the appropriate ministry team or leadership team.
- d. The terms of employment for all employed staff shall be carefully stipulated and reviewed annually. When the terms have been mutually accepted, such terms shall be set forth in writing on approved forms and shall be considered an agreement between the contracting parties.
- e. When there are multiple staff, the division of responsibility and the lines of authority shall be clearly defined and periodically reviewed by the appropriate church officials. Although there must be close cooperation and harmony between staff members, in the final analysis all personnel are responsible to the congregation for the conduct of their offices.

#### **4. Church Officers**

- a. All officers shall be members in good standing of the Church of the Brethren.
- b. The moderator shall be the official head of the congregation but shall recognize the pastor(s) as the spiritual and executive leader. The moderator shall preside at the congregational forums and serve as vice chair of the leadership team and chair of the gifts discernment team. The moderator will be an ex officio member with vote at leadership team and gifts discernment team meetings but without vote at ministry team and project group meetings.<sup>11</sup>
- c. The chair of the leadership team shall serve as the assistant moderator.
- d. The church clerk shall keep accurate minutes of the congregational forum and the leadership team meetings. Minutes shall be kept in a volume provided for that purpose and they shall be and remain the property of the congregation.
- e. The treasurer, who shall be an ex officio member without vote of the leadership team and the ministry team related to financial issues, shall keep a book of accounts of the congregation. The treasurer shall receive the financial secretary's bank deposit slips for all contributions, disburse funds upon proper "order on the treasury," make written reports of all transactions to the leadership team and to the annual congregational forum, or at such intervals as the leadership team may decide. The treasurer shall report the general state of finances to the leadership team and shall also submit accounts to an audit annually at the direction of the leadership team.
  - 1) The financial secretary shall receive, keep records of, and deposit in the bank for the treasurer all contributions from the members and other public and private offerings, and all other receipts. At least two persons shall count and verify in writing all public offerings. The financial secretary shall report periodically to the ministry team related to finances.
  - 2) All financial personnel shall give corporate surety, in amounts determined by the leadership team, for which premiums shall be paid by the congregation.

#### **5. Leadership Team**

The leadership team shall:

- a. provide an atmosphere of worship and invite personal sharing with one another at the

- beginning of each leadership team meeting.
- b. share resources and opportunities for leadership development offered by district, denominational, and ecumenical agencies.
  - c. fulfill the directives of the congregational forum.
  - d. assign, supervise, and coordinate the work of the ministry teams.
  - e. supervise and coordinate the work of project groups not under the supervision of a ministry team.
  - f. project long-range planning, set goals and objectives, and recommend the initiation or discontinuation of programs.
  - g. interpret rules of procedure for ministry teams and project groups.
  - h. with the gifts discernment team, make all necessary appointments.
  - i. with the gifts discernment team, fill all vacancies in elective offices occurring between congregational forums and such other vacancies not otherwise provided for.
  - j. act on recommendations from the appropriate ministry team on staff vacancies and present recommendations on personnel and terms of employment to the congregational forum for all professional staff personnel. Non-professional staff may be employed by the appropriate ministry teams or leadership team as in harmony with local church practice.
  - k. prepare the agenda for the congregational forum.
  - l. establish self-allocation proposals for outreach giving and recommend guidelines to ministry teams for budget planning.
  - m. review the proposed budget for presentation to the congregational forum.
  - n. approve and supervise, within the limits established by the congregational forum, the expenditure of all funds.
  - o. provide for the annual audit.
  - p. allocate and define authority with respect to the establishment of bank accounts and the signing of checks and other legal documents.
  - q. receive, consider, and make disposition of concerns brought by any group or individual member.
  - r. report its activities and actions to the congregational forum.
  - s. bring recommendations to the congregational forum when major church policy needs revision.
  - t. advise and consult with the pastor(s) when there is no pastoral relations team.
  - u. enlist the help and consultation of the district executive/minister and/or other district personnel in program planning and handling of special concerns.

## **6. Ministry Teams**

- a. In general:
  - 1) Mission and vision statements, core functions, size of the congregation, and available resources will determine the number of teams needed.



- 2) Basic areas of church life will be covered by ministry teams. Ministry teams will be added and dissolved as new areas of ministry are identified, as the congregation's needs change, and as persons and groups discern ministries in which they want to be involved.
  - 3) Each team will be chaired by a person called by the congregational forum for a three-year term, with a limit of two successive terms.
  - 4) The gifts discernment team and the leadership team will interact to call other persons to complete the team. They shall serve two-year terms with a maximum three-term tenure.
  - 5) Each ministry team shall have at least three members.
  - 6) Each ministry team will:
    - a) identify its goals as related to the mission and vision statements.
    - b) identify the gifts and skills needed on the team to carry out its ministry.
    - c) report to the leadership team on a regular basis.
    - d) appoint a vice chair and secretary.
    - e) meet regularly or as needed.
    - f) work cooperatively with those carrying out specific ministries, empowering them with the appropriate authority to fulfill their responsibilities (e.g., Christian education teachers, choir director).
- b. Ministry teams shall be responsible for developing ministries in areas such as:
- 1) fostering the spiritual life of the congregation through worship, music, education, and fellowship.
  - 2) securing leadership for special meetings and providing pulpit supply when needed.
  - 3) directing the congregation's witness to the world through evangelism, church planting, ecumenical relations, missions, social action, and ministry to the needy.
  - 4) acquiring, holding, and conveying property in accordance with the decision of the leadership team and/or the congregation.
  - 5) caring for, protecting, and maintaining all church property.
  - 6) receiving, disbursing, and recording all funds of the congregation.
  - 7) building the annual budget for leadership team review.
  - 8) planning stewardship emphases.
  - 9) recruiting, training, and mentoring leaders in cooperation with the gifts discernment team.
- c. Specific duties based upon the core functions for ministry teams should include:<sup>12</sup>
- 1) Worship
    - a) Assist in planning varied corporate worship experiences.
    - b) Consult with the pastor(s) regarding the ministry of preaching.
    - c) Plan for seasonal events and special historical celebrations.
    - d) Develop proposals and provide guidance for the ministry of music.

- e) Give consideration to the use of fine arts in the congregation's program.
  - f) Provide opportunities and suggestions for personal and group meditation and reflection.
- 2) Education
- a) Provide opportunities and resources for formal study in Christian education classes, membership classes, short-term courses or seminars in specific interest areas, and training courses for group leaders.
  - b) Encourage persons to participate in formal study beyond the congregation by taking related courses in adult education in area colleges, in short-term summer schools, or in lay training programs sponsored by church/interchurch agencies.
  - c) Provide opportunities and resources for informal study through house groups, intercultural groups, community affairs groups, other small groups, outdoor education efforts, camps, retreats.
  - d) Develop a library that offers an adequate guided reading program for all members.
  - e) Give consideration to educational values in talk-backs or discussions of sermons.
- 3) Fellowship/hospitality
- a) Assist the congregation in creating a hospitable environment where strangers are welcomed and new people are effectively assimilated into the life of the church.
  - b) Plan congregational social opportunities.
  - c) Give consideration to fellowship occasions for the community surrounding the church.
  - d) Provide guidance for needs of specific fellowship groups such as adult, youth, and Christian education classes.
  - e) Develop plans and secure leadership for interest groups such as hobbies, parents, recreation, therapy.
- 4) Evangelism and church planting
- a) Work with congregations in other communities for mutual helpfulness and shared ministries, such as youth ministries, between suburban and inner-city congregations, or between predominantly white and predominantly nonwhite congregations.
  - b) Plant a new congregation, or work with other congregations or the district to plant new congregations.
  - c) Discover those persons in the community who are not actively related to a church.
  - d) Plan and carry out appropriate forms of evangelism such as personal evangelism, visitation evangelism, fellowship evangelism, educational evangelism, or preaching evangelism.
  - e) Prepare, encourage, and support members in speaking up for Christian values and concerns in vocational, neighborhood, community, and civic groups.
- 5) Social education and action
- a) Lead out and involve the congregation in social education and action on issues in the areas of peace, international relations, citizenship and political life, economic life,

- anti-poverty, race relations, religious freedom, and temperance.
  - b) Send delegates to conferences and seminars on social concerns for purposes of information and training.
  - c) Interpret the church's peace position and alternative service, and counsel all young persons regarding military recruitment.
  - d) Actively involve the congregation in the ministry of reconciliation and interpersonal peacemaking in the church, community, and family.
- 6) Social service
- a) Interpret service opportunities, such as workcamps, resettlement of refugees, disaster relief, volunteer service, to the congregation and recruit people for service.
  - b) Plan volunteer service projects in the community and congregation, and recruit for summer projects elsewhere.
  - c) Aid and support community welfare institutions for the poor, homeless, aged, dependent children, mentally and physically impaired, and those dealing with addiction problems.
  - d) In cooperation with appropriate social welfare agencies, help people in crisis.
  - e) Offer help and counsel to members of the congregation when needed.
  - f) Collect material aid for relief abroad and disasters at home.
  - g) Sponsor overseas people-to-people projects such as student exchanges, resettlement of refugees, and sending members to overseas seminars, workcamps, and tours.
- 7) Stewardship of time and abilities
- a) Recruit for set-apart ministries.
  - b) Enlist and train persons for the congregation's ministries.
  - c) Work with the gifts discernment team to maintain a personnel file indicating the interest, aptitude, and record of service of all members.
- 8) Stewardship of financial resources
- a) Educate and encourage members to be good stewards of their resources, and encourage Christian giving.
  - b) Encourage members to tithe.
  - c) Administer the funds of the church.
  - d) Be concerned for an adequate corporate stewardship of the congregation, including the ratio of resources going to outreach.
  - e) Give counsel to the leadership team on anticipated resources and expenditures in annual budget preparations.
- 9) Stewardship of property
- a) Supervise the care, maintenance, and development of church property.
  - b) Provide adequate insurance coverage.

10) Communications

- a) Publish a periodic newsletter.
- b) Prepare and distribute a brochure introducing the congregation to the community.
- c) Promote the use of denominational publications.
- d) Encourage the use of audiovisuals for interpretation and education, and provide adequate equipment.
- e) Interpret local, district, and denominational ministries.

11) Work with the pastor(s) and staff

- a) Recommend suitable personnel for employment as church secretary and/or custodian.
  - b) Represent the congregation in screening and nominating all professional personnel for employment by the leadership team and/or by the congregational forum, such as the pastor(s), associate pastor(s), administrative assistant, youth minister, director of Christian nurture, director of Christian witness, or minister of music. The employment of the pastor(s) and other professional staff shall be in keeping with approved denominational placement procedures and in consultation with the district executive.
  - c) Stipulate carefully and review annually the terms of employment for all employed personnel. When the terms have been mutually accepted, they shall be set forth in writing and considered an agreement between the church and its employees.
  - d) Recruit capable men and women for the ministry, giving them encouragement and guidance during their training and making recommendations to the congregation and district regarding licensing and ordination.
  - e) Arrange for pulpit supply and other ministerial services during the absence of the pastor(s).
- d. Each ministry team shall prepare annually a tentative budget for its program area which shall be submitted to the leadership team for its use in preparation of the full church budget.
- e. Along with the responsibilities listed herein, additional duties and instructions may be assigned to the ministry teams by the leadership team when deemed to be in the best interest of the congregation. The activities of the ministry teams are subject to review by the leadership team, and regular reports shall be made to the leadership team.
- f. Suggested ministry team models
- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Under 50 members: | leadership team acts as a whole or two ministry teams |
| 50-100 members:   | three ministry teams                                  |
| 100-200 members:  | four ministry teams                                   |
| 200-300 members:  | five ministry teams                                   |
| 300-400 members:  | six or seven ministry teams                           |
| 400-500 members:  | seven or eight ministry teams                         |
| Over 500 members: | eight or more ministry teams                          |

Each congregation will add or dissolve ministry teams as determined by the mission of the church.

## **7. Program and Fiscal Year<sup>13</sup>**

Congregational leaders shall assume their duties January 1 with the exception of Sunday school leadership. The fiscal year for congregations shall be the same as the calendar year. Salaries and extended contracts shall be negotiated at the regular budget-building time for the upcoming fiscal year.

## **8. Business Meetings**

- a. An annual congregational forum shall be held. Other regular meetings may be held as determined by the congregational forum. Special meetings may be called by the moderator or the leadership team upon giving seven-day written notice. The date of the annual congregational forum and other special meetings shall be given to the district office as requested.
- b. Adequate advance notice of all congregational forums and their agendas shall be given to the membership involved.
- c. The leadership team shall meet regularly. Special meetings of the leadership team may be called by the leadership team chair or the moderator.
- d. Ministry teams and project groups shall meet regularly or as the leadership team may direct.

## **9. Quorum**

- a. Although it is desirable to have as many members present as possible for congregational forums, no quorum shall be required except as might be specified by law.
- b. For meetings of the leadership team and ministry teams, a majority of the members shall constitute a quorum.

# **II. THE FUNCTIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH MODERATOR<sup>14</sup>**

## **A. BACKGROUND**

The office of local church moderator in the Church of the Brethren originated following the decline of the free ministry and the advent of the paid ministry. Accompanying that change was the disappearance of a position formerly called “elder-in charge.” The elder-in-charge was usually one of the free ministers, normally one with the most experience, who was recognized as the official head of the congregation. He presided at business meetings of the congregation. During the transition to paid pastors, some churches retained the position of elder, and he also functioned as an advisor to the pastor.

The 1955 Annual Conference<sup>15</sup> adopted the term “moderator” for the presiding officer of the local church and indicated that moderators could be either ministers or laypersons. The action recommended that “the moderator...be a resident member of the church which he serves where there is a person available who meets the qualifications... Otherwise, the moderator should be chosen from outside the church which he serves.” Additionally, terms of service were established for the position of moderator: “The moderator shall be elected by a majority vote for a term of one, two, or three years. He shall be eligible to serve not more than six successive years in the same church, but after one year shall be eligible for election again.” At the beginning of the calling of local church

moderators, approval of the person called had to be given by the district before the person could assume office. Some districts still retain that practice.

The 1955 Annual Conference identified the moderator as “the official head of the church, working through the church board and church council in (the) formulating of polices, transacting of business, and approving of the plans for the work of the church.” The pastor was identified as the “executive head” of the church, with leadership responsibilities in the church program and as the congregation’s spiritual counselor and pastor. Moderator and pastor were to work amiably and closely together, supporting and respecting each other’s roles.

Historically, the office of moderator was filled by ordained elders who were part of the district elders body and answerable to that group in the district. When the elders body was dissolved by Annual Conference action (1967)<sup>16</sup>, the responsibilities formerly cared for by the elders body were transferred to the district board.

The policies and procedures relating to the local church moderator that were instituted by the 1955 Annual Conference basically have been followed by congregations for nearly fifty years. In isolated cases there has been disregard for tenure and occasionally a moderator has assumed an excessive or ill-advised amount of control over the program and nature of the church. That the vast majority of congregations have found the 1955 model for moderators congenial and workable affirms several valid points in that model.

The current design for the organization of a Brethren congregation, “Congregational Structure,” approved by Annual Conference in 2000,<sup>17</sup> proposes a role for the moderator that is consistent with one of the duties proposed for moderators in the 1955 paper. The Conference delegates in 1955 adopted a statement that said, “He (the moderator) should be a member of the church board, church cabinet, or board of administration, and when a resident member, may serve as chairman.” The 2000 “Congregational Structure” paper calls for the moderator to not only preside at business meetings of the congregation when the entire membership is assembled but also to act as vice-chair, with vote, of the principal administrative group of the church (named the Leadership Team in the current structure; similar in nature to a church board or its executive committee). The moderator also serves as an ex officio member without vote of the Leadership Calling Team (a.k.a. nominating committee) and all project group (committee, commission, or task team) meetings. It is recognized that congregations are not required to automatically adopt a new organizational design, and churches in which it may not be feasible for the moderator to be so integrally involved in the day-to-day functions of the church may define the duties of the moderator in a way that best serves their objectives and mission.

The current congregational organization model still recognizes the moderator as the organizational and official head of the congregation and the pastor (or pastors) the executive head and spiritual counselor and shepherd of the congregation.

## **B. QUALIFICATIONS FOR A LOCAL CHURCH MODERATOR**

The local church moderator can be a woman or a man, from laity or clergy, who exhibits in faith and character Christ-like qualities, including love, encouragement, wisdom, graciousness, faithfulness to Christ, and dedication to the church. More specific considerations might be consecrated Christian living in home, church, and community; faithful service and leadership experience in the congregation; understanding and commitment to the traditions, ministries, and polity of the Church of the Brethren; familiarity with parliamentary procedure and models for consensus-building and discernment; and listening skills which seek and invite open, forthright sharing and a willingness to

strive for reconciliation of differing points of view.

Annual Conference has been consistent in suggesting that congregations look first to their resident membership for candidates for moderators. However, a person from outside of the congregation could be called if there are no qualified or willing persons for the office within the church, or if circumstances within the congregation would suggest that a more “neutral” party would be desirable to conduct the congregation’s decision-making. It is suggested that the moderator always be a member of the Church of the Brethren, preferably from the same district. The district may also make available a list of potential candidates who are pre-approved to serve as local church moderators. (The selection of a non-Brethren moderator should be made only after consultation with the district executive and/or district board.) It is further suggested that the moderator be considered “a member of the assembly” over which he/she presides, giving the moderator the privilege of voting on all items decided by the congregation. The moderator may exercise his or her privilege to vote only in the event when the moderator may choose to break or create a tie in the best interest of the church.

### **C. SELECTION AND TERM OF SERVICE**

The process of selecting a local church moderator should follow the same process used in selecting other church leadership persons, whether that be a call process or by election. The term of service and tenure for the moderator should be specified in the congregation’s organizational documents. The traditional term of service for moderators is three years, eligible to be re-elected to a second term; with no more than six years in succession.

### **D. TRAINING**

Since there is limited information available to describe the dynamics of the moderator’s position and role, congregations may wish to consider providing for a time of overlap in terms when the time approaches to select a new moderator. The outgoing moderator could thus provide some mentoring for his or her successor. It also may be helpful, where convenient, for the immediate past moderator to serve as a parliamentary advisor for congregational business meetings for one year beyond their term of service.

It is further recommended that districts provide at least one training workshop for local church moderators annually. The workshop could include such topics as the role and function of the moderator, the development of listening skills and methods of facilitating a business meeting, appropriate counsel for use by moderators in business meetings, relationship between moderators and pastors, and mediation and reconciliation skills.

### **E. ACCOUNTABILITY**

The moderator is chosen by a local church and is primarily accountable to the congregational business meeting. The local church moderator also is accountable to the district board and should seek the counsel of the district, through the district executive, in regard to all problems emerging within the congregation related to district and denominational programs, policy, and polity.

### **F. NEW FELLOWSHIPS**

The above descriptions and recommendations for local church moderators are applicable to established congregations. Denominational guidelines for the organization and development of new fellowships and church projects call for the moderator to be named by the district until such time as

the new group is recognized as a self-sustaining congregation.

### **III. CONGREGATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER DENOMINATIONAL BODIES**<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the language used to describe the relationship, one can discern three different levels of relationship which a Church of the Brethren congregation might establish with some other denominational body. As with districts,<sup>19</sup> congregations should follow the procedures appropriate to the level of complexity and authorization anticipated.

#### **A. YOKING**

In a yoked relationship, two or more congregations operate essentially separate programs. They maintain separate identities but have shared leadership with single or multiple denominational relationships.

1. In developing proposals for a yoked relationship there should be consultation with related district and denominational staff.
2. Approval of the participating congregation(s) should be secured.
3. The district board should be officially notified of the congregation's action.

#### **B. FEDERATION/AFFILIATION**

*Federation* is defined as two or more congregations with joined programs. They share leadership but retain separate denominational identities. *Affiliation* is defined as two or more congregations with a single identity and program. The organizational unit is affiliated with two denominations.

1. Adequate time for preparation, study, and interpretation of a proposal should be taken, including consultation with related district and denominational staff.
2. A two-thirds vote at a duly called congregational business meeting should be required to approve / adopt the proposal.
3. The action should be reported to the district board for ratification and report to district conference.
4. When approving action has been similarly completed by the sister denominational body involved, the plan should be implemented as promptly as possible.

#### **C. UNION**

*Union*, or merger, is defined as two or more congregations adopting a single new identity or one congregation simply unites / merges with another congregation, such that the new organizational unit has a single denominational relationship.

1. Study and action toward union should occur over a period of time sufficient to provide for



consultation with local members, district and denominational staff, and staff from the other denomination involved so as to prepare a plan of union that provides for proper transfer of title to all assets, appropriate response to dissenting opinions, united administrative relationships, clear purposes, and all other appropriate concerns.

2. At a duly called congregational business meeting a two-thirds majority vote shall be required to adopt the proposed plan of union.
3. Thereupon, the congregational officers shall make a written report of the voting to district officials and petition district conference through the district board to ratify the congregation's action.
4. The district board will receive the petition, certify that proper procedures were followed, and forward the petition with the district board's recommendation to district conference for its action. Approval by the district conference delegate body shall constitute ratification of the congregation's action.
5. Following the ratification by district conference and similar appropriate action by the other denomination(s), the transfer of property titles and administrations shall be effected as promptly as possible and the official relationship with the Church of the Brethren adjusted accordingly. Dissenting members shall be privileged to have their membership transferred to churches of their choice during this period.

#### **IV. CONGREGATIONAL ETHICS POLITY**<sup>20</sup>

##### **A. THE SCRIPTURAL VISIONS OF THE CHURCH**

In the New Testament the early church lived into its call to be a faithful community in an unfaithful world, placed there to witness to God's love in Christ. Those who shared in this mission were charged to live with the same kind of self-abandonment and sacrifice seen in Jesus Christ. The support and power for this momentous task came from their participation in a community of people who, with the power of the Holy Spirit, could proclaim their devotion to Christ, share understandings of the way of Christ, and put their devotion and understandings into practice.

Several biblical images instruct us in the nature of this basic Christian community, the congregation:

1. *The Bride of Christ.* In Ephesians 5, the relationship between Christ and the church was used as the model for the covenantal relationship that should exist between husband and wife. The image was one of mutual love and accountability. An understanding of the covenantal nature of the church began with the covenant established between God and Abraham (Genesis 12). There was to be mutual respect and accountability. So long as Abraham's descendants were obedient to God's will, God would favor them with prosperity and long life. It was the first relationship of its kind in the stories of religion—a personal and ethical pact between God and humanity.

In Christ, the covenant between God and God's people was particularized. The covenant now had an "administrator," one who could interpret the relationship between the two "parties." More than that, the church would form a covenant with Christ in order to honor his teaching and example. In turn, the community would be the recipient of Christ's sacrificial love—a love that would form the basis for all other human relationships. Thus, neither the individual Christian nor the church acted independently, but in relation to Christ.

2. *The Body of Christ.* The church was more than a collection of individuals who had promised to follow Christ’s way. The church was the extension of the Incarnation in that it was to function as Christ’s presence in the world and to present evidence of his resurrection. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, made clear how the health of each individual part affects the function of the whole body (1 Corinthians 12). Each part must work properly, that is, with the integrity and love of Christ, for the body to be healthy.

In Ephesians 4, the image was repeated, indicating that the body is whole when each part “speaks the truth in love, and grows up in every way into him who is the head” (4:15).

3. *Sojourners.* The writer of Hebrews described the faithful as those who are aware that their very existence reaches beyond this life. All their actions on earth were to be grounded in and guided by that hope (11:13-16). They were not, then, bound by earthly standards or limitations. They did things for one another that astounded the world around them. They chose to follow convictions of justice and fairness, even though those decisions were unpopular. They accepted a personal discipline that put the welfare of others before their own needs.
4. *Holy People and a Royal Priesthood.* 1 Peter 2:13-17 assigned an awesome responsibility to the church. It was to perform priestly work for the world. It was the priest’s function to speak to God for the people and to speak to the people for God. Service, not domination, was a distinguishing mark of the church’s life and mission. To serve and not to be served was its first priority.

These biblical images provide a lofty portrait of the church—a covenantal community that is just and loving; one that is not bound or given to earthly attitudes and standards; one that transcends those attitudes and standards through service in the world. Traditionally, Brethren have held to some particular values within that overall framework that have guided both our corporate and individual ethics. These values include the following:

1. The New Testament is our rule of faith and practice. We covenant to live by its precepts as taught and revealed in Jesus and affirmed by the apostles.
2. Our word is as good as our bond. We covenant to be truthful in speech and in honoring the commitments we make. Integrity, fairness, and sincerity are requirements of each member of the church.
3. All members are ministers. We are called not only to serve one another, but also to model abundant life in Christ to all with whom we come into contact.
4. We believe in living in harmony with all people, in peacefully solving conflict, and in not harming or degrading any other person.
5. We believe the corporate discernment of the gathered church is our understanding of God’s will.
6. Each member of the church is a valued part of the whole body. God endows each member with spiritual and natural gifts, and the church values each member’s opinion and contributions.
7. We are known by our fruits, and Christ should be glorified and revealed in all we do.

## **B. THE CHURCH AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS**

As is evident in the scriptures of the New Testament, the local Christian community does not exist unto itself. As part of the larger body of Christ, the congregation is one mission point among many. As a community of mission, the congregation also lives as a witness within the local community. The

calling of congregational leadership and staff establishes relationships that create unique expectations and boundaries. Understanding appropriate conduct, then, requires attention to these various relationships.

### 1. [The Relationship to the Wider Church](#)

The Apostle Paul sought to build a close kinship among all the new Christian communities established as a result of his missionary activity. He shared with them the news of what other congregations were doing (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). He reported what others thought of them (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7). He took any promising “missionaries” from the various congregations with him on his journeys (Colossians 4:15). He promoted a mission offering among the churches of Asia for the church at Jerusalem. He forged bonds of service and love within and between Christian communities, overcoming seemingly irreconcilable differences and diversity.

The Christian faith is belief and action shared in community. Christians need other Christians in order to live out their faith. Just as an individual cannot follow Christ alone, a congregation cannot exist in a vacuum. Even in the first days of the church, Paul and the apostles worked to keep the first congregations connected.

The 1992 Church of the Brethren *Manual of Organization and Polity* underscored this fact: “The congregation is not sufficient to itself. It is interdependent with other congregations and the larger church. This calls for patterns which allow the congregation to participate in a network of district, national, and ecumenical relationships. By this interaction, both the congregation and the larger church are enriched.”<sup>21</sup>

This was affirmed in the current polity manual: “Openness to our brothers and sisters reaches from the congregation to the district, to the denomination, to the ecumenical church.”<sup>22</sup>

All Church of the Brethren congregations are encouraged to adopt the recommended constitution and bylaws for congregations as outlined in the *Manual of Organization and Polity*. That constitution states:

The congregation shall covenant 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 shall remain a member of the Church of the Brethren or its successor. The congregation shall send delegates to those official conferences of the Church of the Brethren in which it is entitled to have representation.<sup>23</sup>

As part of the larger denomination, the local congregation is one mission point for the ministry of the whole church. Not only does the covenant between congregations entail a commitment to the polity and policies of the church, but it implies a covenant of trust. The congregation is entrusted with living out the mission and ministries of the denomination. That trust includes the beliefs and practices of the tradition and the material resources to carry out that mission. Property and finances are, then, held in trust by the local congregation. This covenant is to be made explicit in the property deeds and in the bylaws of every congregation. The *Manual of Organization and Polity* makes clear: “All property owned by a congregation, whether incorporated or unincorporated, shall be held, in trust, for the use and benefit and in conformity with practices and beliefs of the Church of the Brethren.”<sup>24</sup>

Congregations are expected to identify this covenant of trust in their bylaws, titles, and deeds in accordance with state laws. In the case of disbandment or departure of a congregation from the denomination, “the district of the Church of the Brethren in which it is located, or the successor, shall have the right to take charge and control of all property and thereafter to hold and manage, and convey the same at the discretion of the district.”<sup>25</sup>

There may be rare instances in which, after much prayer and conversation, the congregation may conclude that affirmation of denominational statements or participation in a denominational ministry conflicts with conscience. A decision not to participate in or support a denominational program should occur only after the congregation has engaged in a responsible process of study, prayer, and open and honest dialogue with denominational representatives. A recommended model of discernment and conversation regarding disagreements with Annual Conference is found in the 2004 paper *Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions*. Congregations should continuously examine and renew their covenant with the denomination and seek the counsel of its leaders. The prayerful conclusion not to support a denominational position or program should be a matter of anguish, not competitiveness or superiority.

Disagreement with particular actions of the denomination does not give a congregation the right to disparage the whole church or individuals. The congregation, as part of the denominational family of Christ, must deal with its family kindly, respectfully, and lovingly.

These same principles apply to the congregation's relation to the district. Annual Conference has identified several specific responsibilities of the districts that are directly related to congregational life, such as the authorization, discipline, and placement of ministers; the coordination of outdoor education; and the training of lay and ministerial leadership. The district is solely dependent on the support and participation of the congregations within its boundaries for the continuation and effectiveness of its ministry.

Congregations are to help establish, support, and abide by the policies and decisions of the district. They are to welcome and work with the district executive or other appointed representatives of the district. They are to cooperate with and give encouragement to other congregations in the district. As Paul made clear in his ministry and letters, the vitality of the church is based on the mutual support each community offers and receives.

The mission and ministry of the Church of the Brethren at all points of its shared life require the participation of all members. The gathered body, in the form of Annual Conference and district conferences, is the place for the discussion of differences, the hearing of collective wisdom, and the discernment of the mind of Christ. This, then, is the nature of authority among the Brethren. "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."<sup>26</sup>

The local congregation also is part of a larger whole, the global body of Christ. The Church of the Brethren has a long and productive history of working with other Christian communions in the interest of Christian solidarity, witness, and service. Brethren congregations endeavor to know and relate to churches of other denominations in their communities. Our one Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, prayed for unity within the Body (John 17) and demonstrated that faithful disciples can speak from different Christian perspectives (Luke 9:49-50).

Ethical accountability in relation to other communions calls for the congregation to contribute the uniqueness and strength of its particular witness toward a common goal rather than seeking to impose sectarian bias. It also supersedes a judgmental stance toward persons and groups of different perspectives, and it rejects underhanded or self-righteous means of luring members away from other communions for its own cause (proselytizing).

On the other hand, the congregation must guard against promoting or aligning with any interest groups or programs that may disrupt the mission of the congregation or pull it away from its covenantal relationship to the denomination.

## **2. The Relationship to the Community**

Jesus made it clear that paying one's taxes was the responsibility of each of his followers (Luke 20:20-26) and Peter suggested that the mission of civil authorities is a part of God's plan for society (1 Peter 2:13-17). The church has spoken to matters of conscience and civil disobedience (1969 *Obedience to God and Civil Disobedience*). Nevertheless, congregations should guard against inappropriate use of tax-exempt status and should honor, in letter and spirit, laws that clearly are applicable to them. This is especially the case in regard to copyright laws, safety codes, employee searches and employment contracts, discrimination, and accommodation of persons with disabilities. Even when churches are exempted from the requirements of some of these laws, the congregation should aspire to compliance, where appropriate.

By striving to be good neighbors, the congregation embodies the mission of God through its programs, activities, and maintenance of its property. Each congregation is to attend to the environmental safety and appearance of its property. It will model peace and justice in its relationship to the community, in its respect for individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and in the methods by which it witnesses to political issues.

As already discussed, it is the congregation's role to represent the message and the truth of Jesus Christ. Often in its history, the church has not been aware of the image it projects in society. At times it has demanded privileges and considerations from the wider society beyond the church's reasonable due. It sometimes has expected to be served, rather than to serve.

A violation of ethical self-expectations occurs if the congregation infringes on the rights of local businesses by repeatedly selling the same or similar products for a price that undercuts the merchants. Businesses understand, and often assist with occasional car washes, bake sales, or auctions that help fund the church. The congregation must be sensitive to the effects of its fund-raising activities on others. The church must guard against abusing discount privileges and soliciting gifts and gratuities with coercive methods. The church should examine the ethical implications of expecting or requesting free professional services. It is perfectly appropriate to accept services and products as gifts, yet requesting these gifts should be done with care and awareness that each offering comes with some sacrifice. Each congregation will fulfill its contracts, agreements, and obligations on time, especially in regard to financial commitments.

The question of litigation when the congregation feels its own rights or privileges have been violated is a difficult one. Traditionally, Brethren have considered such litigation to contradict biblical counsel to not take a dispute into the civil court (Matthew 5:33-37; 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). While that conviction may not be as strong today, there is still a clear ethical problem when Brethren resort to public courts to settle a matter that the congregation ought to be able to handle itself, or to reconcile by more amicable means (Matthew 18:15-17). Complying with biblical directives and desiring to model the peace of Christ, Brethren must seek to resolve disputes in love and harmony.

Another ethical issue for the congregation, in relation to both the local and wider communities, is the responsibility to preserve the environment and natural resources. The congregation should model good stewardship of the environment through recycling practices, avoiding waste of energy, and making choices that minimize refuse. These practices not only benefit the environment and steward the resources of the congregation, they also reflect the Brethren commitment to simple living.

## **3. Relationships in the Congregation**

Many New Testament scriptures admonish congregations to maintain kind and considerate relationships among the members and the leaders of the church. Indeed, the congregation should

model relationships that build up one another and that demonstrate respect and admiration for each person's unique gifts. In that regard, the congregation is to strive for harmony and unity in all it does. Any action or statement that does not first seek the best interests of all its members raises the appearance of misconduct and requires scrutiny.

This criterion also applies to the congregation's organizational structures and decision-making processes. For nearly two centuries, denominational decisions at the annual meeting were made only by consensus. The wisdom of the collective whole is still understood to be the best approximate answer to any question presented to the church. Thus, a congregation shows lack of respect for its members by allowing decision-making to fall into the hands of a few. Each member of the congregation must guard against written or oral statements that advocate for particular positions outside of established business meetings or that are based on incomplete or misleading information. This problem arises especially when groups within a congregation attempt to manipulate attitudes or affect decisions outside of congregational business meetings or other appropriate decision-making gatherings. It is inappropriate for members or leaders to conduct phone or letter campaigns to rally support for a particular position and to influence congregational decisions by recruiting inactive members in order to form voting blocks for congregational business meetings. The congregational forum is the place for shared decision making and congregational leadership should follow its stated bylaws and take appropriate steps to assure that all members have time and freedom to express their perspectives. Full and open communication should be encouraged at all times in the congregation, and complete records of all meetings, decisions, and finances are to be kept and made available to all members.

The recommended constitution for Church of the Brethren congregations gives appropriate direction regarding the mutual accountability of members in the congregation:

On the one hand, the congregation has a covenantal responsibility to care for its members, to encourage growth in freedom and discipleship, to help members discover their gifts and find ways to serve, and to provide ministries which respond to both spiritual and physical needs. On the other hand, each member has a covenantal responsibility to participate regularly in the life of the congregation, to seek the counsel of the church in living out the way of Christ, to challenge the church to greater accountability to its calling, to respond to opportunities to serve in the congregation and beyond, and to contribute to the church's ministries in every way possible.<sup>27</sup>

Sensitivity is to be given to the needs of individuals in the church. The congregation shall provide an environment where personal tensions and difficulties can be shared in full confidence of trust, loving response, and confidentiality. The community should establish expectations of care, forgiveness, and safety for all who take part in its ministries. In the cases of conflict, all care should be given to creating a setting in which reconciliation is the norm, not the exception. Handling disputes through petitioning, letter writing, and anonymous communication is inappropriate given the expectations of mutuality and transparent discernment.

The church's facilities are to be available to all people seeking to participate with the congregation. There are ethical ramifications whenever anyone is denied the opportunity to worship or to participate in other ministries of the church, whether the denial is due to outdated policies and facilities (such as in the case of accessibility for the disabled) or outright prejudice.

Living into the Brethren belief in the priesthood of all believers, the congregation is to be conscious of the need for its lay leadership to model a Christian lifestyle, just as is expected of ministers. The congregation is to teach, nurture, and encourage a Christian lifestyle for all its members and should call to leadership those persons who seek conscientiously to live according to the example of the scriptures and the understanding of the church. When matters of personal

lifestyle arise, the congregation is to do everything possible to nurture and restore the person to a Christian way of life, as modeled for us in Christ.

The congregation is to respect the functions and ministries to which it has called its leaders. For example, it is improper to invite former pastors to perform pastoral functions or visitation in the congregation when another pastor is currently employed. Service by former pastors should be carefully evaluated as to its effect upon the ministry of the current pastor and upon the harmony of the church. It also is unethical for individuals or groups in the church to usurp the authority and tasks of officially elected leaders or committees. It is equally inappropriate for leadership to conduct business in such a way so as to inhibit the full and open discernment of the congregation.

a. Relationship to Pastor(s) and Other Staff

From the first conversations about congregational conduct it has been evident that the most serious questions arise regarding staff. This is especially true regarding pastoral compensation, benefits, and support. Despite clear guidelines within denominational polity, negotiations about salary often present the most opportunity for inappropriate action on the part of the congregation. While identifying candidates for ministry does not usually involve questionable conduct, it is important for the congregation to take seriously its role in naming gifts, supporting discernment, and extending a call to ministry. Since denominational polity deals with many of these issues, only a few insights about conduct are offered here.

First, congregations and districts are to give careful attention to the calling of ministers. Congregations in particular should cultivate cultures of calling in which gifted people are encouraged toward ministry. When a person enters the discernment process the congregation should make every effort to support and pray for the candidate as they pursue the requirements and expectations for credentialing. Exploring one's call to set-apart ministry requires many sacrifices. The role of the congregation does not end once the discernment has begun, but extends through a call to leadership and ordination. Although sending a gifted member to another congregation involves a sense of loss, care should be taken to acknowledge the congregation's role of sending and receiving leaders.

Issues related to the search for and placement of pastors present several ethical considerations. Denominational polity is to be followed in all searches. Confidentiality for the interviewee is very important, especially in cases where the candidate has not yet resigned from a current position or is not definite about seeking the new position. Pastoral profiles are to be kept in utmost confidentiality by members of search committees. Congregations and district executives should communicate openly with the candidates, making sure to honor confidentiality and seeing that information is shared appropriately and fairly. The sharing of confidential information related to staff or potential pastoral candidates undermines the discernment for all involved in the placement process, as does behavior such as persons seeking to influence decision-making outside the official committees charged by the congregation with the search process.

The time of searching for a pastor is filled with anxiety and opportunity. In many cases this climate of expectation, and even fear, opens doors for inappropriate conduct. Honoring the time of discernment and formation is central to the congregation's role in the calling and credentialing process. Care should be taken when considering the placement of licensed ministers who have yet to meet the expectations for ordination. Although short-term placements or interim appointments provide significant learning opportunities, the congregation and district leadership should be sure to provide mentoring or coaching to licensed ministers called to such positions.

After extending the call to a minister, the congregation needs to establish clear understandings with the new staff member as to performance expectations. Such expectations should coincide with appropriate compensation and should be balanced with the time commitments established in the contract.

On occasion, congregations have been slow to recognize the ethical issues relating to adequate compensation and benefits for their employees. There are recommendations related to minimum compensation for pastors approved by Annual Conference every year. This salary table is a gauge for congregations to measure ethical responsibility in dealing fairly with their pastors. In most cases, abiding by the recommendations can be assumed to affirm the congregation's financial responsibilities to the pastor. The guidelines for providing medical and life insurance, pension, and other benefits, as recommended by the Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee, are to be followed as nearly as possible. If congregations find it impossible to meet the guidelines or to provide benefits, there is an ethical obligation to discuss the reasons and their implications with the pastor and to plan in good faith to meet the recommended salary and benefits as soon as possible. If, in the midst of open and honest discussion, it becomes clear that the guidelines for salary and benefits are beyond reach, the job description should be adjusted immediately to match salary and benefits with expectations and time requirements.

An even more critical issue relates to the emotional and spiritual support of pastors and other church staff. A committee or group should be in place in each congregation that regularly relates to the staff regarding their spiritual, physical, emotional, relational, and intellectual well being. Time should be set aside each year to assess the work of staff as well as the ministry of the congregation. Such an evaluation is not an occasion to complain but to identify opportunities and growing edges. Again, care should be taken to balance open conversation and expectations of confidentiality.

The congregation should encourage staff to take adequate vacation and leave time. In ministry, it is too easy to work beyond one's energy and ability. In such cases, neither the pastor nor the congregation benefit from such habits or unrealistic expectations. Congregations need to work with staff to ensure that physical and emotional health are not jeopardized by the work load. Leaders and congregation should expect patterns of rest and sabbath, both during the regular week and at regular intervals throughout the minister's tenure. Sabbaticals are to be based on the Guidelines for Sabbath Rest established by the denomination.

At times the congregation becomes too dependent on its staff for functions that members of the congregation can and should do. Congregational leadership should continually assess and confirm that the current ways of working reflect a commitment to the priesthood of all believers.

On occasion congregations are not considerate of the families of their pastors. For example, a pastor's spouse often is expected to take certain responsibilities in the church. While the minister's spouse is frequently a member of the congregation, his or her participation in the congregation is to be treated as any other member and not as part of the congregation's staff. It also is common for congregation members to assume the parsonage is a public meeting place. Such assumptions are inappropriate, and the privacy of the pastoral family should be respected at all times.

The maintenance of the parsonage at times can become overwhelming and thus be neglected. The congregation should have clear plans in place for swift and adequate repairs. The appropriate congregational committee should develop clear understandings with the pastoral family regarding regular and emergency maintenance of the parsonage.



Conversations regarding the severance of pastoral leadership are delicate in nature and require the utmost attention to appropriate boundaries and conduct. Any concern about leadership should be communicated to appropriate bodies in the congregational structure such as the executive committee. That group should take care to hear the concern and communicate legitimate questions to the pastor. As with any matter of staff assessment, the pastor should be given appropriate time to respond and to address the needed changes. Such an occasion is to be understood as an opportunity for growth and learning, not as a move for power or control.

Clearly, before conversations are conducted about the possible severance of a pastor, dialogue with the pastor is to take place. In such cases the district executive should be included in the conversations as soon as possible. Except in cases of blatant misconduct by the pastor, it is unethical for a pastor to be approached with a severance notice without the attempt on the part of the church to engage in such dialogue and without consultation with the district executive. The *Ethics in Ministry Relations* paper provides detailed procedures for handling matters involving allegations of ethical misconduct.<sup>28</sup>

The departure of a pastor is a delicate matter regardless of the circumstances. If the resignation of a leader occurs under good terms, there are still many emotions to consider. Care should be taken by the congregation and the minister to appropriately grieve and celebrate each other's new journey. If the termination comes under unpleasant circumstances, steps are to be taken to protect the reputation and peace of both the congregation and the minister. Neither is to take advantage of the other, financially or in any formal or informal evaluations made of each other. There should be an attempt to resolve any and all grievances, utilizing the resources of the district Shalom Team or the denomination's Ministry of Reconciliation to accomplish an amicable separation.

In all cases of severance, adequate notice as set forth in the Pastoral/Congregational Agreement is to be given by either the employee or the congregation and severance compensation awarded when appropriate. The district executive is to be consulted early in the separation process and remain involved as appropriate.

b. The Congregation and Sexual Improprieties

Much time and energy has been focused on the sexual misconduct of clergy. Current polity regarding *Ethics in Ministry Relations* is clear about the oversight and procedures related to such troubling events in the life of a congregation. Yet, sexual misconduct is not just committed by clergy. There are also incidents of harassment and other sexual misconduct involving congregation members. Sometimes this behavior is directed toward the pastor, particularly when that person is a woman.

Baptismal covenants are broken if members engage in conduct of a sexual and coercive nature directed toward another member in the church. Sexually harassing behavior in the congregation could include a range of behaviors: sexual jokes and innuendoes, sexually offensive telephone calls, sexual propositions or repeated unwelcome requests for dates, sexually suggestive staring or leering, unwelcome and uncalled-for comments or insinuations about a person's sex or private life, unnecessary physical familiarity or physical contact involving touching in a sexual way, sexually suggestive comments about a person's appearance or body, offensive remarks in general, obscene gestures, indecent exposure, sexual assault, and rape.

These behaviors of sexual impropriety are inherently violent and rely on the premise that an individual has the right to impose his or her sexuality on another. As Christians, we need to acknowledge that sexually harassing behavior is inappropriate in all its forms and respond

appropriately with compassion and accountability. Victims need to be recognized as victims and given the support needed to recover from their experience. Perpetrators also need support and counseling, but they need to be held accountable for their actions. Clearly, the conduct must be stopped and all reasonable steps taken to avoid any repetition.

Steps to prevent sexual harassment in the congregation include creating an environment free of power imbalances that make sexual harassment possible: nurturing relationships in which congregational members value one another as persons in their own right, providing education on the unacceptability of sexually harassing behavior, and providing counseling and support for members dealing with this problem. Attention should be given to avoiding circumstances that may lead to misconduct or the perception that improper behavior is acceptable.

It is urgent that each congregation have in place a process for dealing with allegations of sexual impropriety. Unless a congregation is able to design a more appropriate process for itself, it is recommended that the procedures outlined in the *Ethics in Ministry Relations* paper, Section IV,<sup>29</sup> be adopted by the congregation, with the executive committee serving as the assessment team. The executive committee should take into consideration and utilize as needed the resources available to them, including deacons, district or congregational reconciliation teams, the district executive, and professional caregivers available to the congregation.

The safety of the children involved in a congregation's ministries is to be of the highest priority. Psychological or physical abuse of children is unethical and immoral. Children are vulnerable and have a right to protection from all forms of abuse. Child abuse includes the misuse or perversion of the privilege of caring for children. Examples include physical abuse; emotional abuse involving verbal abuse, belittling, teasing or terrorizing; and sexual abuse. In cases of the physical abuse of children in states where the law requires reporting, the church shall comply. In addition, the congregation must move aggressively to stop the behavior and protect against repetition, minister to the affected child and the child's family, and tend to the need of the perpetrator for treatment.

In addition to a process for dealing with incidents of child abuse, the congregation is to have written policies in effect for the interviewing, hiring, supervision, and reporting of employees and volunteers having child-care duties. Congregations are advised to explore the feasibility of securing liability insurance to cover instances of sexual abuse allegations. A number of resources and sample child protection statements are available from Church of the Brethren and district staff.

### **C. PRACTICES OF AWARENESS, ASSESSMENT, AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Encouraging healthy communities and establishing ethical boundaries are important tasks in the life of the church. Simply establishing a set of expectations is adequate only in so far as the information it contains is integrated into the congregation's culture. To that end, a summary tool has been created to help congregations assess their conduct and behavior.

Although congregations have been encouraged to study the *Ethics for Congregations* document during the pastoral placement process, this practice has not been sufficient given the current understanding of healthy communities. Congregations, then, are to study this document and administer the assessment tool every five years. The results of the assessment and any intended actions are to be shared with the district executive. The district office will keep a copy of the most recent study for purposes of accountability and record keeping. This information will be made available only to the congregation as it begins the regular five-year assessment. In addition,

denominational staff will work with the Council of District Executives to develop study resources and training tools.

The congregation's self-assessment and any counsel of the district or of the Standing Committee are intended to nurture the congregation in its efforts toward faithfulness to the will of God, so that the body of Christ can better live in obedience and unity.

Any code of ethics is only as good as the resolve to keep one another accountable to the outlined values and behaviors. Within the congregation this resolve is especially important, given the culture of the community and the many overlapping relationships within it. Sometimes it may seem easier to let inappropriate actions go unchallenged for the sake of greater peace or for the sake of maintaining relationships among the members. Yet, the model of discipleship presented in the scriptures points to mutual encouragement and accountability as the means of increasing faithfulness. The values expressed in this code of ethics, then, guide us toward nurturing healthy communities by presenting clear expectations and establishing the norms for disciplined correction and shared responsibility.

There are occasions of misconduct, however, that require intentional structures and processes. Most often these matters concern congregational leaders and business. When these occasions are examples of dual relationships or exertion of undue influence, it is essential that third parties are introduced to guide the process of confrontation and resolution.

The suggestions for process below follow the example of discipleship outlined in Matthew 18. It is assumed, however, that the one-on-one conversations already have taken place. When that conversation does not resolve the conflict or concern, then this process should begin:

1. Any member of the congregation, perceiving a breach of fiduciary responsibility, may contact district leadership regarding the concern. The district leadership team or executive committee will serve as the committee of inquiry. When an issue of misconduct is raised with district leadership, notification of the case will be shared with appropriate denominational staff. The district executive and denominational staff will serve in a consulting capacity during the inquiry.

The initial process of inquiry will focus on achieving clarity regarding the questions presented in the complaint. District leadership will meet with congregational leaders as well as others involved. As much as possible, these conversations are to work toward restoration rather than accusation and punishment.

2. If these conversations result in further impasse, the district leadership will take the concern to the district board. Congregational leadership will be invited to further discuss the concerns and the implications for further disagreement. The goal of this meeting, as with the initial inquiry, is to restore relationship and appropriate conduct.
3. If these goals are not met, either from the perspective of the congregation or the district, the district's Standing Committee delegate will pass the matter on to Standing Committee as the adjudicating body of the denomination. This conversation, by the nature of the bodies involved, is the final authority in matters of polity and discipline.

#### **D. THE CODE OF ETHICS**

As a part of the body of Christ, each congregation strives to act with integrity in its daily interactions with those outside of the church.

1. We strive to live by the gospel injunction that our yes be yes, and no be no, especially in regard to civil statutes. We honor the creative work of others by abiding with copyright permissions and compensating those who share their creative work with us.
2. We embody the traditional Brethren posture of separation of faith from politics by refraining from using our non-profit status to support political candidates.
3. We seek to maintain integrity with the business community by meeting invoice due dates, not abusing discount privileges, not soliciting gifts in a coercive or threatening way, and not competing unfairly with local businesses in the commerce of products and services.
4. Our integrity challenges us to work in a transparent manner to the extent that we avoid dual relationships or conflicts of interest in carrying out the work of the church.
5. We strive to be witnesses to Christ's peace in our relationships with one another and the wider community, especially in sharing our message and resources and how we speak to political issues of the day.

As part of the global body of Christ, each congregation seeks to be faithful to Christ's prayer for unity through prayer and support of the church locally, denominationally, and universally.

6. We seek to live out our covenant with the denomination and district, supporting local, national, and international program of the Church of the Brethren by sending delegates to Annual Conference and District Conference, through gifts of time and money, and most of all through our prayers.
7. We recognize that other Christian communities also are brothers and sisters in the family of God. We do not try to proselytize from sister communions. In regard to other religions, we seek to understand and be respectful of their beliefs and practices. While disagreement is inevitable, we seek to enter public conversations with grace and compassion rather than fear and mistrust.
8. We support causes and organizations that reflect the historical and theological understanding of the Church of the Brethren, and we avoid partnering with groups that may detract from our stated mission.

As a community of disciples following the way and teachings of Jesus Christ, the congregation seeks to treat one another with love and respect, conducting the business of the church openly and according to our beliefs.

9. We adequately compensate guest speakers, interim pastors, and other leaders who provide professional services for the congregation.
10. We are a people of reconciliation and seek to resolve disputes or concerns through peaceful means rather than resorting to public courts for a resolution.
11. We work to exhibit love and respect for every individual and ensure that every person has access to our facilities and ministries. We aim to be sensitive to persons with special needs and seek to accommodate them with adequate access to our worship and pastoral services.
12. We consciously seek harmony and unity in every aspect of our program and fellowship, striving for consensus in our decisions and relating to one another in the Spirit of Christ in the bond of love.

Our call to discipleship prompts us to encourage and instruct our members in maintaining lifestyles, attitudes, and actions that reflect the example and teachings of Christ.

13. We steward our time, talent, and treasure as resources for the common mission of Christ's church. Our leaders responsibly manage all the resources and funds entrusted to them in the course of their duties.
14. We address promptly incidents of dissent among us and have a method in place for seeking resolution and reconciliation.
15. We cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving and generosity in all of our life, especially expressing our gratitude to all those who make a significant contribution to the church's work and worship, for all that we have is a gift from God.
16. We endeavor to maintain an environment and program free of sexual, psychological, or physical abuse and harassment, giving special attention to the protection of children, the elderly, and the disabled. In the event of an accusation of abuse or harassment we deal with it forthrightly, promptly, and fairly, in order to stop the behavior in question, minister to all victims, effect change in the violator, and seek reconciliation.

The work of a congregation, especially the contractual agreements with staff, creates unique ethical questions (fiduciary responsibility).

17. We strive to be fair and equitable in support of our staff, adopting the Guidelines for Pastor's Salaries and Benefits as our guide for determining adequate compensation. When diverting from these guidelines, we adjust expectations and time requirements appropriate to scale.
18. We provide a supportive and nurturing culture for our staff through an advisory committee that meets regularly with staff members in an advocacy and counseling capacity. This group will facilitate regular opportunities for performance evaluation of all staff by providing opportunities for appropriate congregational input.
19. We value the ministry of our current pastoral leadership and discourage our members from inviting former pastors to return to perform pastoral functions such as weddings and funerals. We treat friendships with former pastors with special care so as not to undermine the ministry of current pastoral leadership.
20. We strive to be open and transparent in our organization and rely on the ministry of all believers in our midst by identifying and nurturing the gifts and skills of our members. We expect our leaders to execute the duties of their office in accordance with congregational bylaws. We entrust our leaders with the work of the church and expect them to avoid asserting undue influence in the matters of the congregation or seeking favors by nature of their position.
21. We conduct business openly, except when the agenda may deal with confidential personnel matters, and expect transparent and honest dialogue from all our members at all times. We ask that members not seek to influence decisions outside of established open forums through alternative or closed meetings, or by campaigns through alternate means such as letters, phone calls, email, or social media.
22. We hold our property and finances in trust for the denomination. We care for them as our own and have provisions in the deeds and bylaws of the congregation to identify the district or its successor as the recipient of all property and finances in case the congregation disbands or leaves the denomination.

## **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.<sup>30</sup>

### **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"<sup>31</sup> and that "the congregation has an ethical responsibility to support the denomination."<sup>32</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 2000 Minutes, “Congregational Structure,” 208.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

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

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

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 5 of this chapter, “The Ministry.”

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> 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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- <sup>14</sup> 2004 Minutes (2000-2004), “The Functions and Qualifications of the Local Church Moderator,” 1251-1254.
- <sup>15</sup> 1955 Minutes (Conference Minutes for the 169<sup>th</sup> 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.
- <sup>16</sup> 1967 Minutes (1965-1969), “A New Basis of the Eldership,” 235.
- <sup>17</sup> 2000 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Structure,” 222.
- <sup>18</sup> 1971 Minutes (1970–1974), “Merger Procedures,” 154; definitions from 150-151.
- <sup>19</sup> 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.
- <sup>20</sup> 2014 Minutes, “Congregational Ethics Polity,” 258-274.
- <sup>21</sup> 1992 *Manual of Organization and Polity*, 119.
- <sup>22</sup> Introduction section A.6. in the Overview file of this December 2015 edition of the manual.
- <sup>23</sup> Section I.C.4.b. “The Church Denominational” in this chapter.
- <sup>24</sup> Section I.A. “Trust Relationship” in chapter 6 of this manual.
- <sup>25</sup> Section I.C.4.b. “The Church Denominational” in this chapter.
- <sup>26</sup> Introduction section A.3. in the Overview file of this December 2015 edition of the manual.
- <sup>27</sup> Section I.C.5.a. “Meaning of Membership” in this chapter.
- <sup>28</sup> 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.
- <sup>29</sup> 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.
- <sup>30</sup> 2004 Minutes (2000-2004), “Query on Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions,” 1276-1277.
- <sup>31</sup> 2000 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Structure,” 206.
- <sup>32</sup> 1996 Minutes (1995-1999), “Statement of Ethics for Congregations in the Church of the Brethren,” 331.