

Ethics
for
Congregations
1996



Church of the Brethren

Introduction

This paper, *Ethics for Congregations in the Church of the Brethren*, originated from a recommendation in the Ethics in Ministry Relations paper adopted by Annual Conference in 1992, asking for development of “a congregational code of ethics and a system whereby congregations may be called into accountability for unethical behavior.”

Standing Committee received strong support for the recommendation to be implemented. A Standing Committee subcommittee on Human Sexuality and Leadership concerns included the development of congregational ethics in its 1994 report to Standing Committee. In discussing congregational ethics at its meeting in Wichita, Kansas, June 28, 1994, Standing Committee recommended that it be an item of business for the 1994 Annual Conference.

Subsequently, the delegate body of the 1994 Annual Conference adopted the recommendation that a congregational code of ethics be developed and a committee of five persons be elected to study the issue and make a progress report to the 1995 Annual Conference and a final report to the 1996 Annual Conference.

As it began its task, the study committee was well aware of several “givens”:

1. A paper on congregational ethics should be regarded as a companion piece to the paper on *Ethics in Ministry Relations*. Therefore, it should be consistent in theology, direction, intensity, and format.
2. To be consistent with the Brethren understanding of “voluntaryism” in religion, the paper should guard against imposing upon congregations arbitrary requirements that either are not biblically sound or violate traditional Brethren values.¹
3. While the attempt to pull together in one statement a congregational code of ethics is unique not only in our denomin-

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ation but, as far as the committee can tell, unique within the family of Protestant denominations, most of the values that are in the paper have precursors in various Annual Conference and denominational statements. The paper will rely heavily upon those references and sources.

4. As with the paper on ministry ethics, this statement on congregational ethics is not to be regarded as a legal document. Rather, it is an affirmation of the faith and discipleship to which we, the Body of Christ, have been called if we are to remain obedient followers of Him who is the Head of the Church. As such, it provides for the corporate body a standard of behavior that is agreed upon by the church, an affirmation by which the congregation as a whole can be held accountable.

5. This paper attempts to speak to congregational actions, or the collective body of believers gathered at one place and acting as a whole, rather than to individual ethics. The paper on ministry ethics notes that “God calls all members, including those in leadership, to live by the high standards upheld in the scriptures.”² That paper recommends the standards of ethical behavior as applicable to all individual members of the church, with the added responsibility for the leaders and ordained ministers to be role models.

A legitimate question can be raised about the appropriateness of Annual Conference suggesting a code of ethics for individual congregations. For some who are accustomed

to complete autonomy and to making decisions about congregational life and management by whatever method or value seems most expedient, such a code may be viewed as a threat or at best as unnecessary. Other congregations, struggling with survival, economic and otherwise, may feel that the suggested standards of behavior impose an impossible demand upon them, which may result in guilt and discredit.

It is not the intention of this paper to set up standards by which congregations may be “graded” and compared. But it is the hope that congregations may know the mind of the whole denomination regarding what the Body of Christ should be and how it should act as Christ’s representative today, and use this paper as a guideline for seriously examining their own procedures and life. We do not recommend that there be any attempt on the part of the district or any other official group outside of the congregation to initiate an investigation of each congregation’s ethics. The district, however, should be prepared to respond at any time it receives an allegation that a congregation has engaged in questionable ethical activity.

The Nature of the Congregation

In the New Testament the early church sensed its call to be a faithful community in an unfaithful environment, 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 as Christ demonstrated. The support and power for this momentous task came from their participation in a community of persons who together could proclaim their devotion to Christ, exchange 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 is used as the model for the covenantal relationship that should exist between husband and wife. The image is one of mutual love and accountability. An understanding of the covenantal nature of the church begins with the covenant established between God and Abraham (Gen. 12). There was to be mutual respect and accountability, and 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 a 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.” But more than that, the church would form a covenant with Christ . . . to honor his teaching and example and in turn to be the recipient of his sacrificial love — love that would form the basis for all other human relationships. Neither the individual Christian nor the church acts unilaterally, but in relation to Christ.

2. *The Body of Christ.* The church is more than a collection of individuals who have promised to follow Christ’s way. The church is the extension of the Incarnation; it functions as Christ’s presence in the world — the evidence of his resurrection. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, makes clear how dependent is the function of the body on the health of every part (1 Cor. 12). Each part must work properly, i.e. with the integrity and love of Christ, for the Body to be healthy.

In Ephesians 4, the image is 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 describes the faithful as those who are aware that they ultimately belong to an existence that transcends the earthly, and their activity on earth is guided by that hope (11:13-16). They are not then bound by earthly standards or limitations. They do things for one another that astound the pragmatists. They choose to follow convictions of justice and fairness, even though those decisions are unpopular. They accept a personal discipline that puts the welfare of others before their own needs.

4. *Holy Priesthood*. 1 Peter 2:13-17 assigns an awesome responsibility to the church. It is to perform a priestly function for the world. It is the priest's function to speak to God for the people and to speak to the people for God. Service and not domination is a distinguishing factor of the church's life and mission. To serve and not to be served is 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 demonstrated by Jesus and affirmed by the apostles.
2. The Brethren 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.
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 persons, in peacefully solving conflict and in not harming or degrading any other person.
5. We believe in the corporate judgment of the gathered church in 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. Brethren shall be known by their fruits, and Christ should be glorified and revealed in all we do.

Relationship to the Larger 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 Cor. 8:1-2). He reported what others thought of them (1 Th. 1:6-7). He took any promising "missionaries" from the various congregations with Him on his journeys (Col. 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. A congregation cannot exist in a vacuum. It will soon become ingrown and will eventually die from lack of the stimuli of accountability and mission.

The *Church of the Brethren Manual of Organization and Polity* underscores 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.”*³

All Church of the Brethren congregations are encouraged to adopt the model constitution and bylaws for congregations passed by Annual Conference In 1969. That constitution states that “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. . . .”⁴

The congregation has an ethical responsibility to support the denomination. There may be rare instances in which the congregation may conclude that conscience will not permit participation in a particular aspect of denominational program. A decision *not* to participate in a denominational program should occur *only* after the congregation has engaged in a responsible process of study and prayer and open and honest dialog with denominational representatives. Congregations constantly need to examine and renew their covenant with the denomination and to follow the counsel of the church. The prayerful conclusion not to support a denominational position or program should be a manner of anguish, not competitiveness.

Disagreement with particular actions of the denomination does not give a congregation the right to disparage the whole church.

Responsible children who disagree with their parents’ counsel do not belittle them in front of other children nor find reason to withhold their love from them. The congregation, as part of the denominational family of Christ, must deal with its family kindly, respectfully, and lovingly.

The same principles apply to the congregation’s relation to the district. Annual Conference has defined several specific responsibilities to the district organization 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 upon the support and participation of the congregations within its boundaries for the continuation and effectiveness of its program.

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 within the district.

The Church of the Brethren at the denominational and district levels, as in the congregation, permits and encourages a high degree of member participation. The gathered body, such as Annual Conference and District Conference, is the place for discussion and differences to be handled. After that process is employed, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, congregations should seek faithfully to comply with the decisions.

The local church also is part of a larger whole which comprises the 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 effective disciples can come 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 a different orientation, and it decries 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 or pull away from the covenantal life and mission of the congregation.

Relationship to the Community

Jesus seemed to make it clear that taxation that was fair is justified (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). Congregations should guard against inappropriate use of their tax-exempt status and should honor in letter and spirit laws that clearly are applicable to them, such as statutes as relate to copyrights, safety codes, employee rights, discrimination, accommodation of persons with disabilities, et cetera. Even when churches are exempted from the requirements of some of these laws, the church should aspire to compliance, where appropriate.

In regard to neighborliness, the congregation in its programs and activities, as well as in the maintenance of its property, will respect the environmental safety and appearance of the community in which it is

located. And it will model peace and justice in its relationship to the community, in its respect for individuals from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, and in the method(s) by which it may publicly oppose or agree with an issue with strong political or emotional overtones.

Already discussed is the congregation's role in representing the message and the truth of Jesus Christ. Often in its history, the church has not been sensitive to the kind of image it projects in society, or it has demanded privileges and considerations from its environment beyond its reasonable due. It has sometimes expected to be served, rather than to serve.

The congregation must deal ethically with its community. A violation of that duty occurs if the congregation infringes upon the rights of local businesses by repeatedly selling the same or similar products for profit, at a price that undercuts the merchants. Businesses understand, and often assist with, occasional car washes, bake sales, auctions, et cetera. The congregation must be sensitive to the effect its fund-raising activities has on others. The church also must guard against abusing discount privileges and soliciting gifts and gratuities with coercive methods. The church also should examine the ethical implications of expecting or requesting free professional services. It is perfectly appropriate to accept services and products as gifts. Requesting these gifts, however, should be done in a non-coercive way, not an expectation or assumption that they represent no sacrifice. An ethical congregation will seek to make payment for services and products received by the date the bills are due.

The question of litigation in matters in which the congregation may feel its own rights or privileges have been violated is a difficult one. Traditionally, the Brethren considered it not in keeping with biblical

counsel to take a dispute into the civil court (Matt. 5:33-37; 1 Cor. 6:1-8). While that conviction may not be as strong in the modern era, there is still a clear ethical problem for Brethren resorting to public courts to handle a matter that the congregation ought to be able to handle itself, or to settle by a more amicable means (cf. Matt. 18:15-17). Both in terms of complying with biblical directives and to model the peace of Christ, the Brethren must seek to resolve disputes in love and harmony.

Another ethical issue for the congregation, in relation to both the local and wider community, is its 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.

Relationships Within the Congregation

There are many New Testament scriptures that admonish congregations to maintain kind and considerate relationships among the members and the leaders of the church. Indeed, the congregation should be the model for relationships that build up one another and that show 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 an ethical breach and requires scrutiny.

This criterion also applies to the congregation's organizational and decision-making methods. A characteristic of a Brethren congregation is a democratic approach to choices and direction. For nearly two centuries denominational decisions at Annual Conference were made only by consensus. The wisdom of the collective whole is valued as the closest we can get to the best answer on any question. Thus, a

congregation shows lack of respect for a majority of 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 appeal to those persons' positions or authority or that are based on incomplete or misleading information. This problem arises in calculated attempts to swing or manipulate attitudes and decisions. Full communication and dialog should be encouraged at all times, and complete records and minutes of all meetings, decisions, finances, et cetera, kept and made available to all members.

The constitution for 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.”⁵

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. There need to be in place such attitudes of concern, forgiveness, and reason as will readily and effectively provide

for the settling of disputes and for reconciliation among conflicting parties. Handling disputes through petitioning, letter writing, and anonymous communication is unethical if done to circumvent open dialog and proper decision-making.

The church's facilities are to be available to all persons seeking to participate with the congregation. There are ethical ramifications whenever anyone is denied the privilege to worship or to participate in other opportunities of the church, whether the denial is a neglect to update policies and facilities (such as in the case of accessibility for the disabled) or outright prejudice.

The church is to be conscious of the need for its lay leadership to model Christian lifestyle, just as for its ministers. The congregation is to nurture and encourage a Christian lifestyle for all its members and call to leadership those persons who seek conscientiously to live out a Christian lifestyle. When matters of personal lifestyle arise, in a Christ-like spirit the congregation is to do everything possible to nurture and restore the person to a Christian lifestyle.

The congregation is to be sensitive in respecting the functions to which it has called its leaders and ministers. For example, it is improper to invite former pastors to perform pastoral functions or visitation in the congregation when another pastor is currently employed. Serving in leadership or other highly visible roles 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.[6] It also is unethical for individuals and/or groups in the church to usurp the authority and tasks of officially elected leaders or committees.

Relationship to Pastor(s) and Other Staff

In surveys conducted among delegates to Annual Conference and in much correspondence the committee has received, it is evident

that often serious ethical issues are raised in the way congregations treat their staff, especially in matters relating to compensation, benefits, and personal support. The committee discovered that the denomination has very clear policies that advocate and define fair and appropriate considerations of pastors, in particular, and we need only to give some brief reminders in this paper.

First, congregations and districts need to give very careful attention to the call and recruitment of ministers. Congregations should treat with utmost seriousness the calling of qualified persons to the ministry and make provisions to support them in receiving adequate education and preparation for the vocation of ministry. The tendency to judge a person's ability before he or she has had adequate time to learn and demonstrate proficiency for ministry should be guarded against. Similarly, one person's ability or performance should not be compared with another's in such a way as to disparage the first.

Issues related to the search for and placement of pastors present several ethical considerations. Denominational polity is to be followed in all searches.⁷ Congregations and district executives are to consider the questions of fairness and adequate information to candidates when more than one candidate is being interviewed for a pastoral vacancy at the same time. Confidentiality for the interviewee is very important, especially in cases where the candidate has not 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.

The congregation needs to establish clear understandings with the new staff members as to performance expectations. Those expectations should be equitable.

Congregations have been slow to recognize the ethical issues relating to adequate compensation and benefits for their employees. In regard to pastors and associate pastors, there is a recommended minimum scale maintained and revised by Annual Conference for providing compensation. The scale is a gauge for congregations to measure ethical responsibility in dealing fairly with their pastors. In most cases, abiding by the scale can be assumed to meet the congregation's duties to the pastor as to compensation. The guidelines for providing medical and life insurance, pension, and other benefits, as recommended by the Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Committee, are to be followed as nearly as possible. If congregations find it impossible to meet the scale or to provide benefits, there is an ethical obligation to discuss the reasons and their implications with the pastor and to seek in good faith to take steps toward achieving the recommended scale and benefits as soon as possible.

Another, even more critical issue relates to the emotional and spiritual support of the pastors and other church staff. There should be in place a committee or group that regularly relates to the staff regarding their spiritual, physical, and emotional health and well being. There should also be a regular evaluation of the pastor and the church program that will cite weaknesses and strengths of both staff and congregation. The congregation is to encourage the staff to take adequate vacation and leave time. Sometimes the congregation is too dependent on the staff for functions that members of the congregation could do. Congregations need to work with staff to see that physical and emotional health are not jeopardized by the staff member's load.

Sometimes congregations are not considerate of the families of their pastors. For example, often a pastor's spouse is

expected to take certain responsibilities in the church, or it is expected that the parsonage is a public meeting place. The privacy of the pastoral family should be respected.

The maintenance of the parsonage is a responsibility that the church sometimes neglects. The congregation needs to have a strategy by which repairs to the parsonage are made swiftly and competently when breakdowns or problems occur. The appropriate congregational committee should develop clear understandings with the pastoral family regarding the monitoring and administration of the parsonage maintenance.

A further consideration of the pastor and family relates to their need for an extended family. Pastors' families often are geographically separated from their relatives. As holidays are busy times in the life of a congregation, these pastors and their families are often prevented from visiting their own relatives. The congregation has a unique opportunity to become the extended family, providing them with support and friendship that will help them find fulfillment and acceptance. Each of us needs the support of family, or others; the congregation should seek to provide this nurture to the pastor and his/her family.

When it appears that criticisms or other observations of the pastor might adversely affect his or her effectiveness in the church, the executive committee or other appropriate group needs to communicate these concerns to the pastor and provide opportunity for response. Clearly, before conversations are conducted about the possible severance of a pastor, dialog with the pastor is to take place. 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 dialog. The *Ethics in Ministry Relations* paper provides detailed procedures

for handling matters involving allegations of ethical misconduct.

When it is appropriate for a pastor or other staff member to leave the employment of a congregation, there are several very important concerns. If the separation is amicable, then it is important that the congregation find appropriate ways to express appreciation for the person's service, as well as recognition of his or her family.

If the separation is not a pleasant one, due to unsatisfactory performance of the employee or circumstances caused by the congregation that led to the person's resignation, then steps are to be taken to protect the reputation and the peace of both the congregation and the employee. 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, taking advantage of the resources of the district 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.

The Congregation and Sexual Improprieties

The committee notes that a major section of the *Ethics in Ministry Relations* paper is devoted to dealing with sexual improprieties on the part of the clergy. The investigation and discipline in such cases are an assigned responsibility of the district, which is charged with the oversight of licensed and ordained ministers. But charges of sexual improprieties are not lodged exclusively

against the clergy. There are incidents of harassment and other sexual misconduct involving lay workers and members, as well. Sometimes this behavior is directed toward the pastor, particularly where that person is a female.

The covenant relationship is broken if members engage in conduct of a sexual and coercive nature directed toward another brother or sister. Sexually harassing behavior in the congregational family 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 brother or sister's sex or private life; unnecessary physical familiarity or physical contact involving touching in a sexual way; sexually suggestive comments about a sister or brother's appearance or body; offensive remarks; 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 sexually harassing behavior as unethical 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 which 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 activities or events that setup circumstances that might lead to misconduct or the perception that improper behavior will occur.

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, be adapted 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.

Of special concern must be instances of improper treatment of children. 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 both lay employees and volunteers having child-care duties. Congregations also are advised to explore the feasibility of securing liability insurance to cover instances of sexual abuse allegations.⁸

Accountability to the Congregation

Each congregation is called to comply with these ethical guidelines. Moreover, each congregation needs to engage in a thorough self-assessment on a regular basis, using this paper as a guide. The district executive may be consulted for advice and assistance.

When the district board receives credible information that a congregation in the district is in violation of these ethical guidelines, the board should look into the matter and offer its counsel. If the congregation refuses to cooperate with the district board in its review or refuses to adjust its conduct to be in compliance with the guidelines, the board shall report that situation to the next District Conference. Thereafter, if the congregation continues non-cooperation, a Standing Committee delegate from the district shall inform the Standing Committee of the non-compliance. The Standing Committee may give such counsel as it thinks appropriate.

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.

Recommendations

The committee recommends that;

1. The General Board be requested to develop a study guide to assist congregations in their study of this paper.

2. The paper and the study guide be made available and each congregation be urged to engage in a study of the guidelines.

3. This paper and the *Ethics in Ministry Relations* paper be included in the denomination's *Manual of Organization and Polity*. Each congregation is to maintain a current copy of the manual for ready reference.

4. The *Inventory of Congregational Ethics* be included as part of the study materials for congregations. Each congregation is to have its board of administration complete the inventory.

5. District executives encourage congregations to update the *Inventory of Congregational Ethics* each time pastoral placement is needed. The self-assessment report is to be attached to the congregational profile. *

6. The General Board receive and maintain resources and materials relating to these guidelines and provide assistance to congregations or individuals as needed. For information, congregations are asked to share with the General Board policies or procedures they develop relative to the guidelines.

7. Congregations consider providing mediation training for leaders and members, utilizing the services of the denomination's Ministry of Reconciliation Network.

1996 Annual Conference Action

The above report was presented by Phillip Stone, chair, and adopted by the 1996

*A later clarification recommends filing the self-assessment report in the district office and not attaching it to the congregational profile.

Annual Conference delegates. The adopted statement includes two amendments.

The two exhibits that follow, *Ethical Guidelines for Congregations* and *Inventory of Ethics for Congregations*, were part of the committee's report adopted by Annual Conference.

Committee members"

Leah Oxley Harness

Paula Eikenberry Langdon

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Footnotes

¹ *Church of the Brethren Manual of Organization and Polity*, 1992, p.3.

² *Ethics In Ministry Relations*, 1996, p. 3.

³ *Church of the Brethren Manual of Organization and Polity*, 1992, p.119.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.104, item 2.a.

⁷ *Guidelines for Pastoral Placement*

⁸ For detailed guidelines, see *Child Abuse Prevention Handbook: A Manual for the Church of the Brethren*, Association of Brethren Caregivers, Elgin, Ill., 1991.

Ethical Guidelines for Congregations

A Church of the Brethren congregation desiring to maintain high ethical practices, following the example and integrity of Jesus, will strive to maintain the following standards:

1. The congregation shall honor its covenant with the denomination, supporting its national and international program and sending delegates to Annual Conference.
2. The congregation shall honor its covenant with the district, participating in and supporting district ministries and sending delegates to District Conference.
3. The congregation shall regard the other Christian communions in its locale as brothers and sisters in the family of God. It shall not proselytize from other Christian churches and shall be respectful of the teaching and preaching of other religions.
4. The congregation, or groups therein, shall not promote or seek support for causes or organizations that may be contrary to the historical and theological understanding of the church, or that may detract from the congregation's stated mission.
5. The congregation shall 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.
6. The congregation shall be fair and equitable in its compensation to and support of the staff it employs, adopting the Guidelines for Pastor's Salaries and Benefits as its guide for determining what is adequate. The congregation also shall provide a support group, such as a staff advisory committee, to meet regularly with staff members in an advocacy and counseling capacity.
7. The congregation shall honor all civil statutes that are clearly applicable to its activity, including those relating to tax-exempt status, copyrights, building and environmental safety, civil rights, and employment. It also shall be respectful of neighbors' rights and its obligation to maintain the appearance and upkeep of its property. ¹
8. The congregation shall model its peacemaker role in its relationships and witness in the community, including the content and distribution of its literature, its contacts within the larger community, and in the way it responds to political issues.
9. The congregation shall explore all peaceful and reconciling means to settle differences it may have with groups and individual rather than resorting to public courts for a resolution.

10. The congregation shall honor and exhibit love and respect for every individual and insure that every person has access to its facilities and services. It also shall be sensitive to persons with special needs and seek to accommodate them with adequate access to its worship and pastoral services.
11. The congregation shall consciously seek harmony and unity in every aspect of its program and fellowship, striving for consensus in its decisions and relating to one another in the Spirit of Christ in the bond of love.
12. The congregation shall foster democratic leadership in its organization. It shall nurture its leaders in the gentle use of authority.
13. The congregation shall encourage and instruct its members in maintaining lifestyles and exhibiting attitudes and actions that reflect the example and teachings of Christ.
14. The congregation shall nurture every member in the fulfillment of his or her commitment to give of time, talents, and treasure to Christ and the church, and in turn, provide means by which every member is fully and consistently informed about the church's program and opportunities.
15. The congregation shall open all meetings to any church member, except when and agenda may deal with a confidential personnel matter, and open and honest dialog shall be encouraged and enabled at all times.
16. The congregation shall address promptly incidents of dissent within its program and fellowship, having in place a method for seeking resolution and reconciliation.
17. The congregation shall exhibit a spirit of thanksgiving in all of its life, especially expressing its gratitude to all those who make a significant contribution to the church's work and worship.
18. The congregation shall be responsible for adequately compensating guest speakers, interim pastors, and other leaders who provide professional services for the congregation.
19. The congregation shall honor its commitment to current pastoral leadership and discourage its members from inviting former pastors to return to perform pastoral functions, such as weddings and funerals.
20. The congregation will seek to maintain an environment and program free of sexual, psychological, or physical abuse and harassment, giving special attention to the protection of children. When problems arise, the congregation will deal with them forthrightly, promptly, and fairly, to stop the behavior in question, minister to any victim, effect change in the violator, and seek reconciliation.

Footnote:

- ¹ This guideline assumes that most statutes named in this paragraph would not affect recognized instances for civil disobedience. It is acknowledged that acts of conscience in some cases may lead Christians to disobey laws that conflict with the law of god. For a complete study of civil disobedience, see *Minutes of the Annual Conferences, Church of the Brethren, 1965-1969*, p. 414.

Inventory of Ethics for Congregations

Each congregation, in most instances through the church board, is urged to participate in this *Inventory of Ethics for Congregations*. The inventory enables a self-assessment of how the congregation functions as an ethical community. This inventory relates to the 1996 Annual Conference paper *Ethics for Congregations*, to which reference should be made to complete the inventory.

It is not intended that this review result in a “grade” or imply that one congregation is better than another. The value is in the review and the prayerful response to it.

To the extent that questions are answered other than “always,” consideration should be given to adjustments. The fact that there may be questions of interpretation is not

important; what is important is that these topics be addressed.

Clearly, this is not an exhaustive list. Such basic matters as avoiding gossip and untruthful accusations are also important. As the congregation identifies other areas needing review, they should be added.

As you proceed with the inventory, please indicate which response best describes your congregation. Once the inventory is completed by the church board or other group, identify and discuss those items needing attention.

Also determine the frequency with which this self-assessment be undertaken. Note that regular review is encouraged, and that a special review be conducted at the time of pastoral change.

Our Congregation:	<i>Always</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>
1. Sends delegates to Annual Conference.					
2. Attempts to support and carry out Annual Conference policies.					
3. Stays informed about Annual Conference actions.					
4. Financially supports the General Board and its program.					
5. Sends delegates to District Conference.					
6. Supports the District program and activities, e.g., camps.					
7. Works cooperatively with other denominations in the community.					

Permission is granted to copy this appendix for congregational use.

Our Congregation:	<i>Always</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>
8. A voids endorsing and supporting activities and causes which are contrary to Church of the Brethren teachings or that detract from the denomination's programs.					
9. Pays its bills promptly.					
10. A voids unreasonable requests for discounts or special gifts from businesses.					
11. A voids repeated and unfair competition with local businesses.					
12. Pastor (and other staff, if applicable) is paid fairly and provided with reasonable benefits. ("Paid fairly" should be understood to mean at least denominational scale or as close to scale as the congregation, using its best efforts, can manage. "Reasonable benefits" means the Brethren Medical Plan, its substantial equivalent, or as much as the congregation can afford.)					
13. Provides a support group for the pastor and pastoral family to give emotional and spiritual support.					
14. Communicates concerns with staff performance promptly, constructively, and through proper channels.					
15. Seeks faithfully to comply with all laws (except for act of conscience) including fire, safety, environment, civil rights, employment laws, etc.					
16. Models in the community how peacemakers relate to each other and to the community.					
17. Seeks to resolve differences within the congregation peacefully and without resorting to litigation.					
18. A voids anonymous calls and letters or communications outside established open forums as a way to discuss church business and issues.					

Our Congregation:	<i>Always</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>
19. Seeks to assure that all interested persons have physical access and reasonable accommodation to be able to participate in the church and its program.					
20. Tries to operate with strong consensus and harmony in the way it makes decisions.					
21. Supports called and elected leadership and does not accept autocratic or heavy-handed control.					
22. Works at calling its members to follow lifestyles, develop attitudes and behave in ways that reflect the example and teaching of Christ.					
23. Seeks to give all persons in the congregation opportunities for service, fulfillment, and leadership.					
24. Except for personnel matters and other items which need to be done in confidence, handles decision-making and business in the open with adequate opportunity for members to be informed and to participate.					
25. Manages conflict and dissension in a remedial and nurturing way, not letting the problems go unattended or becoming more intense.					
26. Shows appreciation to its leaders, members and others who provide special blessing and service to the congregation.					
27. Avoids inviting former pastors to return to perform pastoral functions such as weddings, funerals, etc.					
28. Maintains a work and program environment free of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse.					
29. Tries to be conscious of circumstances that might result in the abuse of children or adults and makes adjustments as needed.					

Study Guide

Ethics for Congregations

by Carroll M. Petry and Jan Eller

Introduction

In adopting *Ethics for Congregations* at the Cincinnati Annual Conference in 1996, the Church of the Brethren took a distinct step in enacting what is probably the first and only official denominational statement on the subject. Other churches have expressed interest in following suit.

Religion News Service, in an extensive article on September 12, 1996, described the paper as follows:

“Thou shalt not steal thy neighbor’s sheep, nor speak ill of thy parent organization when in dissent. Thou shalt not be an environmental hazard, nor an eyesore in the community. Let thy bake sales and car washes be sparing and not undercut thy neighbor’s business.

“It isn’t said quite like that, nor is it a set of formal commandments, but for what is believed to be a first for an American denomination, the Church of the Brethren has adopted a code of ethics to govern the conduct of its 1,127 congregations.

“The code covers a host of issues ranging from how a congregation treats its pastor and other staff members to the way it seeks new members, functions in its neighborhood, and relates to other religious congregations and to the parent denomination.”

In the same news release, Loren B. Mead, an expert on congregational life and founder of the Alban Institute, is quoted as saying, “As far as I know, it’s unique. I haven’t seen anything like it. It could be a model for other denominations.”

The paper was prepared in response to an earlier denominational statement dealing with ministerial ethics. Phil Stone, chair of the

Congregational Ethics Study Committee, explained that misconduct often works both ways and that congregations needed to be responsible, too.

This statement from the paper itself explains what the paper is and is not: The ethics code does not intend “to set up standards by which congregations may be ‘graded’ and compared ... but it is the hope that congregations may know the mind of the whole denomination regarding what the Body of Christ should be and how it should act as Christ’s representative today, and use this paper as a guideline for seriously examining their own procedures and life.”

Teaching Suggestions

Use one to four sessions of 45 to 60 minutes each. Here is one way to study the paper in four sessions.

Session 1: Examine the first half of the paper (through the section on “Relationship to the Community”) using the following summaries and discussion suggestions. Where possible, introduce examples from your own congregation’s life.

Session 2: Examine the second half of the paper (beginning with the section on “Relationships Within the Congregation”).

Session 3: Discuss the first appendix, “Ethical Guidelines for Congregations.” Distribute copies of the second appendix, “Inventory of Ethics for Congregations,” and ask participants to fill out the inventory. (Before the session that follows, tally the results and prepare a summary.)

Session 4: Discuss the results of the inventory. Summarize the sessions and deal with final questions concerning the paper. Urge participants to become aware of the ethical issues of the congregation. Close with

a prayer that this paper will work to the glory of God and our members' and neighbors' good.

Following are brief summaries of each section of the paper and points suggested for discussion.

Introduction. Stated here are the reasons for the paper and a five-point list of "givens" or understandings on which the committee based its work. The paper is not a legal document but an affirmation of proper behavior for the Body of Christ. The paper relates mostly to group actions, the body as a whole, and not to individual ethics.

1. Ask the group: Do you think the church needs a code of ethics for congregations? Why or why not?

The Nature of the Congregation. This section surveys important biblical images of the church found in the New Testament: the Bride of Christ, Ephesians 5; the Body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4; sojourners, Hebrews 11:13-16; and holy priesthood, 1 Peter 2: 13-17. Also listed are seven values Brethren have embraced that guide our corporate and individual ethics.

1. Ask four groups or individuals each to read one of the passages of scripture listed: Ephesians 5 (and Genesis 12), 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, Hebrews 11: 13-16, and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Have them describe to the larger group the image of the church that is presented. Ask the total group: Which do you find most relevant? How do these images help us understand our congregation?
2. Review the seven values that are lifted up in the paper. Ask: Do you agree that these are distinctive to Brethren? Do you think we live by these values? What other values do you think are important?

Relationship to the Larger Church.

Emphasized here is our interdependence with other congregations, the district, Annual Conference, and the ecumenical world. Note especially the paragraphs following the quote from the *Manual of Organization and Polity* regarding dealing ethically with Annual Conference, denominational policy, and the district.

1. The paper says, "Christians need other Christians in order to live out their faith. A congregation cannot exist in a vacuum." Ask: Do you agree with this view? Why or why not?
2. Ask the group to react to this statement: "The congregation has an ethical responsibility to support the denomination."
3. Ask the group to generate lists of ways the congregation supports 1) the denomination, 2) the district.
4. Ask: What are ways we are involved with churches of other denominations? How do you feel about these efforts? What should be the purpose of such involvements?
5. The paper warns against "promoting or aligning with any interest groups or programs that may disrupt or pull away from the covenantal life and mission of the congregation." Ask the group to think of examples.

Relationship to the Community. Covered here are legal and tax issues; neighborliness, as regards the appearance of the property and environmental safety; images the church projects in society; ethics in business matters and relationships; going to court; and stewardship of the environment.

1. Ask: Are any of these instructions surprising to you? Are there any with which you disagree?
2. Ask: Can you think of instances in which we have been violating laws (for example, photocopying without permission)?

3. Ask: What is the historical basis for the Brethren position on not suing anyone? Is this a viable position for today? Why or why not?

Relationships Within the Congregation.

This section offers a guide for organizational and decision-making methods, for mutual accountability (note the quote from the suggested constitution), and for making the facility and program accessible to all. It also deals with how the congregation relates to former pastors.

1. Discuss this statement: “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 an ethical breach and requires scrutiny.”
2. Ask: How well do you think we handle congregational business? Does our decision-making process work at seeking the wisdom of the collective whole? Is consensus a model that is workable for us?
3. Ask: How well does our congregation handle disagreement? How about you personally? Is Matthew 18 still a blueprint for us in handling conflict?
4. Ask: How would you feel if another member lovingly challenged your lifestyle? Is there a role for the congregation in discussion of lifestyle? What does “the simple life” mean to us in today’s society?

Relationship to Pastors and Other Staff.

This section deals with pastoral placement, salary and benefits, emotional and spiritual support, care for pastoral families, and severance.

1. If the congregation has engaged in a pastoral search within recent memory, ask the group to recall the process used and reflect on how well it was handled.

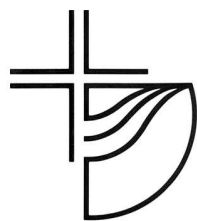
2. Ask: What is our congregation’s basis for pastoral compensation? Do we pay according to the recommended scale? How do we feel about this?
3. Ask: How does our congregation communicate its expectations to the pastor? Does the pastor have a position description?
4. Ask: Do we have a pastoral relations committee? Does it conduct regular evaluations of the pastor? Of the congregation?
5. Discuss the role of such consultative groups as the denomination’s Ministry of Reconciliation and the district’s Discipleship and Reconciliation Committee.

The Congregation and Sexual Improprieties. Dealt with here is sexual impropriety and sexual harassment of adults and children.

1. If it seems appropriate, arrange for someone to report on the procedures outlined in the *Ethics in Ministry Relations* paper. This 1996 Annual Conference statement is available from Brethren Press.
2. Find out what policies are in effect to ensure the safety of children in your church activities.

Concluding Sections. The final sections of the paper urge congregations to follow the guidelines and make recommendations to the church at large.

1. Ask: Have your ideas about the subject of this paper changed after this study? How important do you think the topic is?
2. Ask: Where can our congregation grow and make changes?



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