

Leadership Team Statement in Response to On Earth Peace's Decision to Join the Supportive Communities Network

The recent announcement from On Earth Peace to become a member of the Supportive Communities Network¹ has raised polity questions for the Leadership Team, which is responsible for interpreting Annual Conference decisions and denominational polity.²

Although On Earth Peace (OEP) is a separately incorporated agency and can therefore make decisions apart from the discernment of Annual Conference, OEP's decision to join the Supportive Communities Network conflicts with OEP's official agreement to serve as an Annual Conference agency. That agreement, as recorded in current denominational polity, states that On Earth Peace will "*commit itself to providing ministry that is within the scope of Annual Conference directives and congruent with articulated values of the Church of the Brethren.*"³

Special interest groups in the denomination are not bound by such an agreement and are free to express thoughts and ideas different from what we have decided together as an Annual Conference. However, when an Annual Conference agency joins a special interest group that promotes and acts outside the agreements discerned by Annual Conference, as On Earth Peace has done, it places itself over and against the decisions of the Annual Conference and no longer represents the whole of the church. This conflicts with OEP's agreement to "*work faithfully in partnership with the Annual Conference and other Annual Conference affiliated agencies to serve the entire denomination.*"⁴

By taking this action, On Earth Peace has chosen to stand over and against the 2011 decision of the delegate body of Annual Conference "*to reaffirm the entire 1983 'Statement on Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective,' and to continue deeper conversations concerning human sexuality outside of the query process.*"⁵ That paper established two key aspects of the denomination's current position: (a) that "*covenantal relationships between homosexual persons is an additional lifestyle option, but in the church's search for a Christian understanding of human sexuality, this alternative is not acceptable,*" and (b) that "*the church can extend Christ-like comfort and grace to homosexual and bisexual persons*" by:

- *welcoming all inquirers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into the fellowship of the church. This welcome and the resources of the church are made available by the grace of God who calls us as repentant sinners to be partakers of the faith. Some guidelines for the church's response and for discipleship have been delineated;*
- *intensifying efforts to understand how genetic makeup and childhood experiences have influenced the development of sexual orientation and behavior;*
- *challenging openly the widespread fear, hatred, and harassment of homosexual persons;*

¹ <https://www.onearthpeace.org/scn>

² *Manual of Organization and Polity*, chapter 1, section III.C.c. (page 9 of the 2019 edition accessible at <http://www.brethren.org/ac/documents/polity-manual/1-annual-conference.pdf>). Source of the polity is 2010 Minutes, "Church of the Brethren Bylaws Revision," 234.

³ *Manual of Organization and Polity*, chapter 2, section II.C.2. (page 13 of the 2019 edition accessible at <http://www.brethren.org/ac/documents/polity-manual/2-denominational-board-agencies.pdf>). Source of the polity is 1998 Minutes (1995-1999), "On Earth Peace Assembly Request for Reportability/Accountability to Annual Conference," 805.

⁴ *Manual of Organization and Polity*, chapter 2, section II.C.2. (page 13 of the 2019 edition accessible at <http://www.brethren.org/ac/documents/polity-manual/2-denominational-board-agencies.pdf>). Source of the polity is 1998 Minutes (1995-1999), "On Earth Peace Assembly Request for Reportability/Accountability to Annual Conference," 805.

⁵ 2011 Minutes, "A Statement of Confession and Commitment," 232.

- *engaging in open, forthright conversations with homosexuals. When we stop alienating one another and instead venture toward understanding, some fears disappear and interpersonal relationships become more honest;*
- *advocating the right of homosexuals to jobs, housing, and legal justice;*
- *stating clearly that all antisocial, sexually promiscuous acts are contrary to Christian morality;*
- *giving strong support to persons who seek to be faithful to their heterosexual marriage covenant, but for whom this is difficult because of struggles with homosexuality.*⁶

The Leadership Team appreciates that much of On Earth Peace’s work engages the Annual Conference decision to “extend Christ-like comfort and grace to homosexual and bisexual persons.” However, On Earth Peace’s decision to join SCN positions OEP in opposition to Annual Conference’s current discernment about covenantal relationships for homosexual persons.

Our history makes clear that Annual Conference can and often does change decisions on the basis of new understandings, as happened when the delegate body of Annual Conference changed its positions on the use of revival meetings, musical instruments, and the office of elder. But the position of Annual Conference does not change until the delegate body decides to make such a change. Our polity requires that denominational and Annual Conference agency leadership comply with the decisions that Annual Conference has made. On Earth Peace agreed to do so when it became an official agency of Annual Conference in 1998. The Leadership Team believes that On Earth Peace’s decision to step outside its agreement with Annual Conference damages the credibility of Annual Conference agencies and weakens the value and meaning of Annual Conference.

On Earth Peace, however, is not answerable to the Leadership Team. As an independent corporation, On Earth Peace is answerable to its members. But as an Annual Conference agency, On Earth Peace is also answerable to the delegate body of Annual Conference, who act upon recommendations from Standing Committee. The Leadership Team believes that On Earth Peace’s decision is of sufficient consequence to require On Earth Peace to enter into intentional, serious, prayerful engagement with the Standing Committee and the delegate body of Annual Conference. The Leadership Team believes an outcome of that engagement should be a determination of OEP’s Annual Conference agency status, given their decision to join the Supportive Communities Network.

The Leadership Team commends On Earth Peace for their commitment to disenfranchised, marginalized people and their encouragement of “relationship and open communication rather than exclusion, . . .working to protect the rights of gay people in society.”⁷ We further acknowledge OEP’s “view that agencies of the church both help express the will of the church and creatively point toward new possibilities.”⁸ But it is the Leadership Team’s response that such creativity by an agency of the Annual Conference is best carried out through procedures that engage the delegate body and must be achieved in harmony with the polity and positions of Annual Conference. We believe such an approach urges us to do “life together,” as collectively, we strive to know the mind of Christ.

⁶ 1983 Minutes (1980-1984), “Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective,” 580. (Accessible online at www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1983humansexuality.html)

⁷ <https://www.onearthpeace.org/scn> in the Frequently Asked Questions section

⁸ <https://www.onearthpeace.org/scn> in the Frequently Asked Questions section

The Leadership Team of the Church of the Brethren

David A. Steele, general secretary, chair

Paul Munday, moderator

David Sollenberger, moderator-elect

James M. Beckwith, secretary

Cynthia S. Sanders, representative of the Council of District Executives