



Church of the Brethren

MANUAL OF ORGANIZATION AND POLITY

February 2023

OVERVIEW

Preface, Introduction, Contents

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Manual of Organization and Polity

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Previous editions of the *Manual of Organization and Polity*
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Online editions have been posted since 2001 as new polity decisions were incorporated.
Significant revisions were made in 2008, 2015, and 2023. Changes to this edition are explained in the Preface.

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PREFACE

This manual draws together current organization and polity of the Church of the Brethren approved by Annual Conference. Footnotes identify the Annual Conference actions that are the bases for our polity.

For this 2023 edition, the three polity changes adopted by the 2022 Conference have been incorporated. The new polity for Annual Conference agencies is integrated into chapter 2, along with the implementation guidelines and previous organizational descriptions, which will remain in the chapter until implementation of the new polity is completed. The amendments to the appeal section of the “Ethics in Ministry Relations” polity have been incorporated into chapter 5, and the revisions to the Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren, Inc. have been incorporated into the appendix and into sections of the bylaws that are quoted in chapter 1.

Beyond that, this 2023 edition basically incorporates editorial decisions made by Leadership Team in its role as interpreter of Annual Conference decisions and denominational polity. Research of polity is constantly requested, and we occasionally discover an additional Annual Conference action to cite in relation to a piece of polity, a footnote to write more clearly, or a typographical error to correct. We seek earnestly to have all information be as completely accurate as possible. In 2021, the Mission and Ministry Board expressed concern that the capitalization style typical for legal documents should be applied to our bylaws. We now capitalize more of the specific titles for denominational leadership roles.

This 2023 edition supersedes the *Manual of Organization and Polity* published in 2001 and all subsequent online versions through the 2021 edition.

Nearly every section of this manual is a direct quote of Annual Conference decisions which established or updated polity. Occasionally, brief statements about current organizational patterns or standard practice have been included, even though they are not polity. They are appropriate to a manual of organization. These statements about organizational patterns or standard practice are identified by footnotes. Other footnotes offer explanatory comments by the compilers. The notes have been expanded and improved to aid the researcher and frequently include historical information that shows the evolution of the church’s thinking on a particular matter. For the most part, however, footnotes lead the reader back to Annual Conference minutes. In some cases, large sections of lengthy Annual Conference statements have been incorporated into the manual. These excerpts generally do not include introductory material or sections from Conference minutes that do not speak directly to organization and polity.

When quoting information from this manual, please note that the direct authorization for the text is found in the Annual Conference minutes cited in the footnote. In nearly all cases, actual quotations are used. Readers seeking additional information on a particular topic are directed to the full documents in the Annual Conference minutes. Because pagination varies from one edition of the manual to the next, it is best to reference the name of the section and the number of the subsection, specifying the edition of the manual. Section numbering may change when new polity is added to future editions. References to page numbers in previous editions of the manual may be identified by consulting with the Brethren Historical Library and Archives, where previous versions of the *Manual of Organization and Polity* can be found.

Since 2001 new editions of the *Manual of Organization and Polity* has been available online only. Users are welcome, however, to print their own hard copies from the online files.

INTRODUCTION

Organization and polity reflect an understanding of the nature of the church and the primary spiritual directive that motivates a religious body. In a letter circulated in 1708, soon after the first baptism, the early Brethren declared: “we must publicly profess that which Christ Jesus taught and did without hesitation or fear. . . .What is then better than being obedient and not despising the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . We (must) begin in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus to live according to His commandments.”¹

This original proclamation by the founders of the Brethren Movement in 1708 has been evident throughout the history of the Church of the Brethren. In 1995, the denominational board adopted a pair of “identity lines,” which define the Brethren and thus guide our development of organization, structure, and polity. These were presented to the Annual Conference in 1995 and were accepted, in a manner of speaking, when the delegates accepted the report of the denominational board. The first defines the witness of the Church of the Brethren as “another way of living.” The second declares that the message and life of the Church of the Brethren is “Continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together.”² The issue then becomes, “What kind of organization and structure would a church that is dedicated to these goals and purposes have?” We always need to relate structure to function.

Various efforts have been made to classify the governance system of the Brethren in comparison with other systems within the wider body of Christian churches. Even though some elements are comparable to what one finds elsewhere, it seems clear that the early Brethren did not intentionally seek to copy any system existing in their time. They started with a clean slate, so to speak, with just the body of committed followers. They developed new structures and procedures as need arose, and then only after intensive study to see what actually was done in the New Testament church. They tried to take the commandments of Jesus and the practices of the New Testament church as literally as possible.

This primacy of the teachings and example of Jesus, and the subsequent development of the church as described in the New Testament, led the Brethren to develop not only a doctrinal stance but a system of organization and polity patterned after what they discovered within the New Testament. This desire to emulate the beliefs and practices of first-century Christians has been called “primitive Christianity.” To some, there is conflict in trying to be “primitive” and “modern” at the same time. But the Brethren discovered in Acts 15 the way that the church can experience continuity and still make new decisions and set new directions.

For the Church of the Brethren, the whole church—the entire membership, the denomination—has been the focal point and basis of structure and function. The division of the whole body into smaller groups (congregations and later districts) is an adaptation to the increased number of members and their geographical dispersal. Congregations were originally defined in terms of geographical area and were “only laid off for convenience, and not to divide the body.”³ These subdivisions were variously referred to as districts, arms of the church, or sometimes just a church. Each body was under the direction of a bishop or presiding elder, also sometimes called an overseer or housekeeper. Gradually, in the nineteenth century, membership became associated with a particular building and the named congregation came into common practice.

¹ Donald F. Dumbaugh, comp. and trans., *European Origins of the Brethren* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1958), 115-120.

² 1995 Minutes (1995-1999), “Report of the Church of the Brethren General Board,” 51.

³ 1849 Minutes (1778–1909), Article 40, 112.

We understand from the fifteenth chapter of Acts that the collective body of all members has an identity separate from and an authority higher than the individual congregations. Just as an individual member may be likened to a foot or a hand, or an eye or an ear, but is not the body,⁴ so the congregation is just a part of the body. An individual congregation is not the church. The Annual Conference of 1853 put it this way: “. . . all the arms of the church [congregations] are but one body in Christ, and each arm stands in the same relation to the other as an individual member stands to the other individual member.”⁵ In 1863 the question was raised, “Can . . . (a local church) be congregational or act independent from all the churches of our fraternity, and still be in full union with the church? Answer: It cannot, according to the gospel and the order of the Brethren. (See Romans 12:4,5; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3,4, etc.)”⁶

For several centuries, the Church of the Brethren has regarded the Annual Conference as the highest (human) authority in the church. This has been said in many ways but none more clearly, perhaps, than this statement in 1968: “The delegate body assembled in Conference is the ultimate authority of the Church of the Brethren. It is composed of the Standing Committee and the local church delegates. It functions primarily as a deliberating legislative assembly, determining the polity and setting forth the primary courses of action and relationships in which the church should be involved. All other agencies of the church should assist the delegate body in the performance of that which it regards as the business of the church.”⁷

This policy was reiterated most recently in 1991 when a committee report declared “The Annual Conference is the final authority of the Church of the Brethren in all matters of procedure, program, polity, and discipline.”⁸ And in 2004, Annual Conference delegates approved a report that declares, “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’ and that ‘the congregation has an ethical responsibility to support the denomination.’”⁹

Delegates to the Annual Conference should be selected with care and intentionality. Annual Conference is not a place for predetermined points of view representing specific constituencies to be debated, as in a secular political legislative assembly. It is a setting where people come together to consider questions before the church and to seek the will of God through prayerful debate and Bible study. Delegates are to “be chosen on the basis of their qualifications rather than to effect a financial saving for the local church.”¹⁰ The qualifications of Conference delegates (both Standing Committee and local church delegates) have been clearly stated: consecrated Christian living in home, church, and community; faithful service in local church and district; loyalty to the ideals and program of the Church of the Brethren; a working knowledge and understanding of the total church program; ability to exercise mature judgment in the solution of Church of the Brethren problems.¹¹

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:14-31.

⁵ 1853 Minutes (1778–1909), Article 26, 138.

⁶ 1863 Minutes (1778–1909), Article 20, 222.

⁷ 1968 Minutes (1965–1969), “The Frequency and Organization of Annual Conference,” 318.

⁸ 1991 Minutes (1990-1994), “Denominational Structure Review,” 273. Compare 2022 Minutes, “Revisions to the Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren, Inc.,” 264 (Article Two, Section 1 in the Appendix at brethren.org/ac/ppg/).

⁹ 2004 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions,” 1276, which quotes from 2000 Minutes (2000-2004), “Congregational Structure,” 206, and 1996 Minutes (1995-1999), “Statement of Ethics for Congregations in the Church of the Brethren,” 331.

¹⁰ 1960 Minutes (1955–1964), “Election and Term of Service of Standing Committee,” 180.

¹¹ 1947 Minutes (1945–1954), “Brotherhood Organization,” 55, 56.

The leadership of congregations and district organizations, especially the delegates to Annual Conference (both local church and Standing Committee delegates) are accountable for reporting and interpreting Annual Conference actions.¹²

A. DEFINITIONS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

At various times we have approved some definitions to polity and authority that will be useful in the context of the present volume:

Polity: The ways the church is equipped for service in obedience to its Lord and in an effort to do its job. Polity has to do with those orderly procedures that grow out of the life and work of the church. Jesus appointed disciples to share in his ministry (Mark 3:13-19) and commissioned them in their servant role (Luke 10:1-12). Organizational patterns are neither intrinsically sacred nor unimportant. They are measured by their faithfulness to that purpose of God which was set forth in Christ “as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10).

Authority: The power to make and carry out decisions. In accomplishing its ministry in the name of Christ, the church draws upon the resources of all members. There are various gifts within the Body of Christ which contribute to the carrying out of its work. Each is required for the church’s mission, and to prepare believers for their discipleship in the world. The community appropriately designates certain individuals and groups who carry delegated authority in implementing the tasks of the church (1 Corinthians 16:15; Acts 6:1-6).¹³

Of course, the point where the church touches the life of the individual member most directly is the congregation. In our modern world, it is often difficult to sense the vital interconnection between the local unit and the wider denominational body. This is accentuated by the fact that many large and very well-known religious bodies view the congregation as having full autonomy. Various television ministries represent large, single congregation-type bodies that are totally independent of any denominational context. One Annual Conference committee observed, “Throughout the years the distinctive characteristic of Brethren polity has been the rhythm between local initiative and accountability to the brothers and sisters of the total denomination.”¹⁴ The deliberate choice of individual members, congregations, and districts to function as the Body of Christ together is the basis for our polity. Polity is, as one former moderator defined it, “A covenant of how we work together in the church.”¹⁵

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

1. The highest authority is God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. All human authority is judged with reference to this ultimate standard.
2. Authority is exercised both formally through organizational structures and designated persons and informally through spontaneous groupings and natural leaders. This authority is to be implemented with respect for individual conscience, openness to new light, acceptance of criticism, and the willingness to allow decisions to persuade on the basis of their intrinsic merit.

¹² 1976 Minutes (1975–1979), “Brotherhood Understanding,” 207-208.

¹³ 1968 Minutes (1965–1969), “Church Polity, Including Referendum on Merger and Coordination of Ecumenical Concerns,” 336.

¹⁴ 1987 Minutes (1985–1989), “Revisions of Brethren Polity,” 482.

¹⁵ This definition of polity was stated by 2009 Annual Conference Moderator David Shumate.

3. Authority is held accountable within the community, which in turn diligently seeks the “mind of Christ” in study of the scriptures, in dialogue with brothers and sisters, and in openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit.
4. The principles of “voluntaryism” in membership and belief and “no force in religion,” which are firmly rooted in our tradition, make us avoid arbitrary patterns of enforcement which violate the freedom of individuals and local groups.
5. The practice of brothers and sisters confronting each other is an essential part of our serving as a “priest to one another.” Our Anabaptist heritage teaches that “no one enters the kingdom apart from our brothers and sisters.” This leads us to reject unqualified individualism, which denies the place of the community in the shaping of one’s life of discipleship.
6. Openness to our brothers and sisters reaches from the local congregation to the district, to the denomination, to the ecumenical church. Administrative structures must constantly be measured by this criterion: Do they make possible full and free interchange between brothers and sisters in Christ as the collective means for coming to know God’s will for the church?¹⁶

B. THE COMPILATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND POLITY DECISIONS

The minutes of Annual Conference comprise thousands of pages spanning several hundred years of church history. The first published minutes available to church leaders in 1837 were only a few pages in length and included the minutes in both English and German. By the end of the nineteenth century, the minutes were 15 to 20 pages in length, by this time only in English. Beginning in 1875 a series of full reports, complete stenographic accounts of the floor discussions of each issue, was published until 1930. Volumes of full reports often exceeded 100 pages in length. During this time the briefer, condensed minutes were also published, reaching 40 pages by 1930. By the 1980s the published minutes often exceeded 150 pages. In 2008, the Conference minutes totaled 363 pages!

Numerous compilations of minutes have been published. From 1945 through 2008, four or five year collections of Conference minutes were issued in hardcover. Since 2009 each year’s minutes have been published as an individual volume. These are the volumes of minutes referenced in the footnotes of this manual. They can be purchased from Brethren Press. In addition, there are some indexes of queries and issues of the recorded Conferences. Researchers interested in this aid are encouraged to contact the Conference Office or the Brethren Historical Library & Archives.

¹⁶ 1968 Minutes (1965–1969), “Church Polity, Including Referendum on Merger and Coordination of Ecumenical Concerns,” 337.

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Appendix Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren, Inc.