



## Church of the Brethren General Board

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March 5-8, 1983

### Background information related to the following resolution

In recent months persons assigned overseas by the World Ministries Commission to the Middle East have been confronted by government officials in their country to sign statements that they will not speak ill of that country or associate with persons who are related to a certain organization in that country. These persons were confronted with a decision where there is some lack of clarity on the part of the Church of the Brethren policy and in the WMC Manual of Policy and Procedure for overseas staff. This incident brought attention to other situations, especially in Central America and Africa, where overseas staff might well be confronted with similar situations and decisions. In our own country there is a new mood, not unlike the McCarthy era, which might confront us once again with tests of loyalty and allegiance. It is within this context that the following resolution was precipitated and is set, in the hope that the issues might be addressed before other situations arise and in a less emotionally charged atmosphere than that of the 1952 Annual Conference Resolution. It is the recommendation of staff that this resolution be discussed, amended as needed, and recommended to the General Board for adoption. If the resolution is adopted by the General Board, its thrust would then be reflected in a revised edition of the WMC Manual of Policy and Procedures

## Resolution on Oaths or Pledges of Allegiance and Loyalty to the State

Christians are confronted regularly with choices which test whether their primary loyalty is to God or to the state, society, culture, race, economic system, etc. The faithful Christian can clearly affirm with Peter, “We must obey God rather than men,” (Acts 5:29) while being much less clear what Jesus meant by rendering “to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” (Mark 12:17) and Paul by expecting “every person to be subject to the governing authorities.” (Romans 13:1)

Brethren in their efforts to be faithful have struggled with the question of allegiance and loyalty to the “principalities and powers” throughout their history.

- Not subscribing to the Pennsylvania oath Law of 1777, which required an oath renouncing allegiance to George III and pledging loyalty to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, caused suffering and the confiscation of property of many Brethren during the Revolutionary War period.
- The Civil War would have divided the Church of the Brethren had it not been for courageous leaders like John Kline whose lives demonstrated that ultimate loyalty and allegiance could not be commanded by either the Union or the Confederacy.
- During the specially called Annual Conference of 1918 an action was taken calling on members to “refrain from wearing the military uniform and learning the art of war.” This position became the basis for the U.S. War Department to charge “the officers of the Goshen Conference, and authors of the Goshen Statement, as guilty

of treasonable intent of obstructing the operation of the Select Draft Law” and the charges of treason were only dropped when it was agreed that, although never rescinded, the statement would be withdrawn from circulation.

- As an anti-Communist fervor spread across the nation in the early 1950's, requiring persons in certain situations to take oaths of loyalty to their country, the 1952 Annual Conference declared: We believe that loyalty oaths, wither to secure or to hold a position, constitute a dangerous practice which is inimical to the preservation and the propagation of our democratic ideals.

Out of experiences of testing and struggles such as these, the Church of the Brethren in the 20th Century began to articulate more clearly its positions on issues of church and state. Relevant are the following portions of three policy statements adopted by the Annual Conference:

- We seek no special privilege from our government. What we seek for ourselves, we seek for all-the right of individual conscience, which no governmental authority can abrogate. As Peter said, “We must obey God rather than man.” (Acts 5:29) This 1948 statement on War was subsequently revised in 1957, 1968 and 1970 as follows: “We believe that no government has the authority to abrogate the right of conscience. ‘We must obey God rather than man. (Acts 5:29)’ -1970 Statement of “The Church of the Brethren on War”
- The work of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and through its power, includes (1) the proclamation of the gospel message and (2) a ministry of love to men in relation to their need. Both proclamation and ministry in the world necessitate a confronting of the great issues of public life and the affairs of government. To this end, there must be a proper definition of the relationship between church and state.
- Separation of Church and state means separation not of concerns, for church and state share many of these, but of institutions. It means that the state may not become the servant of any creed or sect and that the church may not become the voice or tool of the state. This requires the institutional independence of each. This principle does not automatically resolve all constitutional problems in church state relationships, but it does provide a basis for working at these problems. ...
- The Church affirms the institution of government as ordained by God (Romans 13:1), necessary as an instrument for maintaining order, securing justice and freedom, and promoting the general welfare. ...
- The Christian should appreciate and support the worthy functions which government performs. He should willingly obey the state in matters on which he has no contrary moral conviction. On the other hand he should be alert to occasions when government neglects or misuses its trust from God. When he is profoundly convinced that God forbids what the state demands., it is his responsibility to express his convictions. Such expression may include disobedience to the state. This drastic step should be taken only after prayer, careful thought, and consultation with other, yet without losing due respect for the state. He should make known to the community his reasons for opposing the policies of the state, and demonstrate his willingness to accept the consequences. The church should respect the right of the individual to follow his conscience in this way and should provide a ministry of love, concern, and fellowship. -1967 Statement of “The Church, The State, and Christian Citizenship”
- The State and its citizens, the church and its members, all are under God and ultimately accountable to him as creator, Sustainer, Judge, and redeemer. The sovereignty of the state is limited by the sovereignty of God. While the state may demand reasonable loyalty from its citizens, it must not demand absolute obedience which belongs to God. The state is caught in strong tendencies to act as if it were absolute. We live in a world atmosphere pervaded by nationalism which snare Christians also into absolutizing their particular country. To the extent that the state does not set itself up as absolute, to the extent that it provides and protects freedom of conscience, and upholds, sustains and protects just and moral laws, there is not need for citizens to disobey the state in order to obey God. Obedience to civil authority can be consonant then with Christian faithfulness.  
- Annual Conference 1969 Statement on “Obedience to God and Civil Disobedience”

While emerging technological innovations are making our planet into a global village, voices still call us and pressures are placed upon us, in our country and upon our members living and serving in other lands, to pledge their loyalty to parochial interests and powers in a way that violates God's all-inclusive love and justice. Therefore, we . . .

- Recall and reaffirm these earlier positions taken by the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren,
- Call upon our members wherever they live and serve to refrain from those pledges and affirmations of allegiance and loyalty to "principalities and power" that compromise the claims of God upon us, and
- Pledge our love, concern, and support to all who witness in this way, and especially to those who may suffer hardship because they in good conscience resisted the encroachment of the state upon the rightful witness and mission of the church and its members.