

GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONAL WITHDRAWAL FROM THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN SOUTHERN PENNSYLVANIA DISTRICT

It is the desire of the Southern Pennsylvania District that any congregation experiencing conflict or uncertainty about remaining in the Church of the Brethren will be open and receptive to dialogue and discernment about those issues. The District further desires that those issues can be resolved in such a way that congregations may remain in full fellowship with the District and the denomination.

In the event that an agreeable resolution is not achieved, it is the desire of the District that the withdrawing congregation and the Church of the Brethren may separate in an orderly manner and with grace and prayers for the well-being of one another.

Denominational polity, which cannot be changed by Districts apart from utilizing the Annual Conference query process, emphasizes the unity of congregations, Districts, and the denomination as a whole. It does not give a specific process or guidelines on exactly how a congregation may conduct a vote to withdraw or what the involvement of the District should be in that process. However, there is general guidance which can be gleaned from a study of the 2016 Manual of Organization and Polity that can assist the District in developing an orderly process for congregations to withdraw. As a foundation for the Guidelines for Congregational Withdrawal which concludes this document, the pertinent sections of the 2016 Manual of Organization and Polity are quoted and referenced below.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FROM DENOMINATIONAL POLITY

VI. CONGREGATIONAL DISAGREEMENT WITH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

DECISIONS¹ *Annual Conference 2004 approved the report of a study committee assigned to examine a query asking how congregations can disagree with Annual Conference decisions yet remain, as much as possible, in unbroken fellowship with their sister congregations, including how district boards should respond in these situations. The paper needs to be read in its entirety to get the full background and impact of the report. The following is the section giving suggestions for process and guidance to the district for its response to disagreeing congregations.*

A. SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESS

Because congregations may disagree with Annual Conference decisions, it is appropriate to consider a process when disagreement is evident. Since disagreement is heavily impacted by individual and unique circumstances and often must be considered on a case-by-case basis, the following is not intended as polity to be applied unilaterally throughout the denomination for each

¹ 2016 Manual of Organization and Polity, Chapter 3, The District, IV, A-B, pg. 19-20. This outlines the process by which congregations that disagree with an Annual Conference decision or policy can express their disagreement and work with their District leadership to arrive at an agreeable means of maintaining unity. It does not specifically address the departure of congregations from the denomination.

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individual case. Rather, it is intended to outline broad parameters in which it is hoped that congregations and districts can find suggestions that will help us work toward reconciliation and satisfactory resolution within our understanding of community. The goal of the following process is to find God's truth together in a respectful Christian community. It is hoped that any congregation that feels led to disagree with Annual Conference decisions should assume a special responsibility to initiate extended dialog with others in the denomination about its choice. In so doing, the congregation should not automatically assume the role of prophet, but rather, try to model and encourage a spirit of finding the mind of Christ amid diversity in discernment.

B. GUIDANCE TO THE DISTRICT

There is an expectation that within the context of ongoing district ministries and congregational relationships, awareness of disagreement with a specific Annual Conference action might emerge early on. District leadership should anticipate potential congregational disagreement with any particular Annual Conference action before receiving official notice in the form of a letter from the congregation, and review district procedures for processing congregational disagreements. Once official notice is received, the district is encouraged to review the matter and determine a response as soon as possible. Response measures might be to:

- *send a letter of response from the district executive, the district board chair, board commission chair, district Standing Committee member, or some other appropriate individual;*
- *schedule a visit to the congregation for respectful dialog, discussion, and interpretation;*
- *appoint a group or committee to meet with the congregation to discuss the disagreement;*
- *utilize the skills of the district Shalom Team and other reconciliation workers to give guidance and facilitate dialog;*
- *call for a day of prayer and fasting to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for appropriate spiritual conduct;*
- *facilitate a forum at which the congregation in disagreement might present its position or understanding;*
- *consult with resource persons outside the district, including mediation leaders, On Earth Peace staff members, Mission and Ministry Board members, Annual Conference officers, Leadership Team, and others;*
- *bring the matter to the district conference only if all attempts at reconciliation have proven unsuccessful or unsatisfactory, and if the issue is such that it represents a threat to the overall unity and effective ministry of the district. Specific recommendations to the district conference might include*
 1. *a statement acknowledging that the congregation in question is "out of harmony" with the denomination on the particular*

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issue, but remains in support and in fellowship with the district and Annual Conference;

- 2. a call to prayer for all congregations within the district seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit regarding the issue, and seeking a spiritual anointing that would express love, tolerance and patience (Col. 3:12) rather than judgment and avoidance.*

Each district is encouraged to put in place framework for processing a congregational disagreement with an Annual Conference action, in keeping with these suggestions. The process should be flexible enough to allow for the wide variations of each case, yet specific enough that it has accountability and direction. Each district should establish such a process prior to the recognition of the need for said process. The goal of the district response process should be to help the congregation move to an understanding of the Annual Conference action and willingness to support the action, or at least a willingness to refrain from taking any action that would be interpreted as being defiant or insubordinate. If this goal is unattainable and there is a lack of reconciliation, an acknowledgment should be made that the congregation continues supporting the larger church in other aspects of its life while disagreeing with Annual Conference in the particular matter. It is expected that reconciliation attempts will continue.

Finally, within our current polity Standing Committee continues to serve as the appeals body. Any decision that is made by a district board or a district conference can be appealed to the Standing Committee, and the congregation in disagreement retains that right. The decision of Standing Committee is final.

D. 3. DISORGANIZING OR WITHDRAWING CONGREGATIONS²

“If a congregation is disorganized by the district pursuant to the powers granted in chapter 3 (II.E. “Disorganizing Congregations”) and chapter 4 (I.C.16.d. “Disorganizing Congregations”) of this manual, or if it attempts by either majority or unanimous vote to withdraw from the Church of the Brethren district in which it is located or otherwise ceases to exist or function as a congregation of the Church of the Brethren, any property that it may have shall be within the control of the district board and may be held for the designated purposes or sold or disposed of in such a manner as the district board, in its sole discretion, may direct. When assuming responsibility for the control of disorganizing or withdrawing congregations, the district board shall give aid and counsel to the congregation.”

² 2016 Manual of Organization and Polity, Chapter 6, Property Holdings and Financial Resources, I, D, 3, pg. 2. This portion establishes Denominational control of property and restricts the use of that property for Denominational purposes.

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D. 6. DISTRICT'S RIGHTS TO CONGREGATIONAL PROPERTY³

The rights described in this polity for the district board to take control or to approve the voluntary transfer of congregational property shall be exercised solely for the purpose of assuring that the property or its proceeds are not diverted from use for the Church of the Brethren and shall not imply a right on the part of the district board to otherwise affect or control the use of the property by a congregation of the Church of the Brethren.

E. RETURN OF PROPERTY TO CONGREGATIONS⁴

In cases where the aforementioned restrictive covenant providing for the divestiture of title to property owned by a congregation results in the title being vested in the district board, in trust, it is understood that this action is taken only as a means of preserving property for the purposes of the Church of the Brethren. This property has been purchased and developed by consecrated effort, and in many cases at great sacrifice, by individuals who have been loyal to the principles of the Church of the Brethren. If the district board determines that circumstances warrant, the district board may return the property to the congregation. If the district board determines that circumstances do not warrant the return of the property to the congregation, the district board shall use or dispose of the property in the best interests of the Church of the Brethren.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FROM SOUTHERN PENNSYLVANIA DISTRICT POLITY

ARTICLE 4⁵

Property Holdings, Financial Resources, & Dissolution Statement
Property Holdings. All members of the Southern District of Pennsylvania Church of the Brethren acknowledge they are brothers and sisters of the same family through Jesus Christ. Though all of the same family, the District is comprised of individual congregations. Historically, the Church of the Brethren has encouraged individual congregations to control their own future and affairs within the parameters of the teachings of Jesus Christ and the doctrines of the Church of the Brethren. Though each congregation legally owns its own real and personal property, recognition is given that the family of the Church of the Brethren has equitable title. In light of present legal realities, in the absence of formal recognition by each congregation of this balance of legal and equitable title, and in the event of a fragmentation of a congregation, a civil

³ 2016 Manual of Organization and Polity, Chapter 6, Property Holdings and Financial Resources, I, D, 6, pg. 3. This portion establishes Denominational control of property and restricts the use of that property for Denominational purposes.

⁴ 2016 Manual of Organization and Polity, Chapter 6, Property Holdings and Financial Resources, I, E, pg. 4. This portion states that the District Board has the authority to return property to a church which is withdrawing from the denomination at its discretion.

⁵ District Plan of Organization, Southern District of Pennsylvania, Church of the Brethren, 9/18/2010, pgs. 13-14

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court could award the property to a majority of the congregation. To avoid this potential, congregations are encouraged to acknowledge a trust/fiduciary relationship between the District and the congregation. This can be accomplished, either through amendment of the congregational by-laws or a formal Trust Agreement, to be effective and binding in the event a majority of the membership of any congregation wishes to disassociate itself from the Church of the Brethren. To that end, the District would avail itself to serve as Trustee for such purposes. For all other issues regarding property holdings and financial resources, the District will defer to the Denominational polity as a guide. (SEE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN "Manual of Organization and Polity.")

4.2 Dissolution Statement. Southern Pennsylvania District, Church of the Brethren, though individually incorporated in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, is a part of the Church of the Brethren denomination with general offices located at 1451 Dundee Avenue, Elgin, Illinois 60120. In the event of, or upon dissolution, the net assets of this Corporation shall be distributed to the Church of the Brethren.

In light of the above information from both Denominational and District polity, and in order to provide for an orderly separation in fellowship when reconciliation cannot be achieved, the following Guidelines for Congregational Withdrawal from the Church of the Brethren Southern Pennsylvania District is hereby adopted.

GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONAL WITHDRAWAL from the Church of the Brethren Southern Pennsylvania District

- I. It is the responsibility of the congregation, its moderator and/or ministerial leadership, and its Leadership Team to notify the District Executive of its conflict or uncertainty about remaining in the Church of the Brethren. Plans for withdrawal should not be made in secret.
- II. The District Executive, District Board Chair, District Ministry Commission Chair, and one other District Board member appointed by the District Executive shall serve as a Reconciliation Committee. Should the District Board Chair or District Ministry Commission Chair be part of the congregation wishing to withdraw or if either should be unable to serve for any reason the Vice Chair of the District Board and the Vice Chair of the District Ministry Commission shall serve.
 - A. The Reconciliation Committee should meet with the congregational leadership within thirty (30) days of receiving official notice of the congregation's concerns to listen to their leadership, to understand their grievances, and to attempt a resolution of the same.

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- B. The Reconciliation Committee will listen to the congregation's grievances, offer suggestions for resolution, and explain the process and the consequences of withdrawing from the Church of the Brethren Southern Pennsylvania District. Specifically, the Reconciliation Committee shall explain that upon a vote to disassociate from the District and the Church of the Brethren, the District shall own the Congregation's assets subject to the District Board's election to relinquish ownership if the Congregation complies with Section D hereof. If the issues remain unresolved with the congregational leadership, the Reconciliation Committee should meet with the full congregation after the Reconciliation Committee's determination that a reconciliation is not possible. The Reconciliation Committee, in cooperation with the congregation's leadership, should schedule a vote on withdrawal by the congregation. At or near the close of this meeting the Reconciliation Committee shall indicate that individual members wishing to discuss the matter of withdrawal any further are welcome to contact the District Executive.
- C. The Reconciliation Committee, in cooperation with the congregation's leadership, shall conduct the vote of the congregation concerning its withdrawal from the Church of the Brethren. The congregation shall provide a copy of its most recent active membership list to the Reconciliation Committee. The Reconciliation Committee shall individually issue ballots only to those whose names are included on the most recent official membership list. The Reconciliation Committee shall provide printed ballots as illustrated:

BALLOT CONCERNING WITHDRAWAL (CHURCH NAME) (DATE)	
INSTRUCTIONS	
Circle YES to <u>withdraw from</u> the Church of the Brethren	
Circle NO to <u>remain with</u> the Church of the Brethren	
YES	NO
<hr style="width:80%; margin:auto;"/>	
Signature and printed name of person casting ballot	
Prepared by the Southern Pennsylvania District	

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1. No absentee ballots are permitted.
2. Votes will be counted by the Reconciliation Committee along with the local Moderator/Board Chair and two other individuals appointed by the local congregation.
3. A vote to withdraw will be successful if two-thirds of the total number of votes cast are in the affirmative.
4. A vote which does not attain the necessary two-thirds majority will result in the congregation remaining with the COB. The Reconciliation Committee will offer to continue working with the leadership/congregation to achieve reconciliation and a healthy working relationship.
5. Any individual members of the withdrawing congregation who wish to remain in fellowship with the Southern Pennsylvania Church of the Brethren will be encouraged to do so and will be offered support from the District. Details of such support will be determined by the District Board on a case by case basis.

D. Disposition of Property

According to both Denominational and District Polity, all congregational property is held in trust with the District and, accordingly, will be the property of the District immediately after the vote, if the Congregational vote is to disassociate from the District and the Church of the Brethren. In the event the District Board votes at its next regularly scheduled meeting to relinquish ownership of the disassociating Congregation's former property, the Congregation must pay two (2) times the current District Financial Ministries Allocation to the District for use by the District at its discretion.

In addition, the disassociating Congregation shall pay all legal fees, the Congregation's and the District's, incurred during the withdrawal process.

E. Ministerial Credentials

Upon a successful vote to withdraw, all credentials for all ministers are immediately terminated with the Church of the Brethren and the Southern Pennsylvania District. No person may continue to perform weddings under the authority of the Church of the Brethren or the Southern Pennsylvania District. Accountability and liability for other ministerial functions such as marriage, personal, or family counseling, ministerial ethics, etc. shall no longer be under the authority of the Church of the Brethren or the Southern Pennsylvania District but shall be the sole responsibility of the individual and/or of whatever subsequent denomination with which they may associate.

However, upon a successful vote to withdraw, if a credentialed individual, Licensed, Ordained or Retired, as a member of that congregation votes "No," a vote to not leave the denomination, the District, upon request by the individual, will offer the following

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process to allow for transition. After the vote, and upon request, the District will hold the individuals credentials for approximately one year, independent of congregational calling. This is intended to allow time for the individual to discern and transition to another congregation or fellowship within the denomination. It is expected that after the transition, the new congregation or fellowship may affirm the calling of the credentialed individual, allowing them to continue their ministry within the current definition specified by the District.

We recognize each congregation and their decisions are unique and each request will be considered individually. We, the District Executive and the District Ministry Commission, are available to answer any questions or concerns by any individual or congregation concerning these guidelines.

Dual Ordination Position

In support, and for practical application, of the best practices provided in the "Leadership Team Update in response to the activities of the Covenant Brethren Church"⁶ (Leadership Team Update) the Church of the Brethren, Southern Pennsylvania District (District) developed the following procedure. This procedure, as deemed necessary, will be followed when dealing with competitive recruitment, dual membership, and dual ordination by any denomination or church body.

The Leadership Team Update cites two specific polities, "Ethics in Ministry Relations" and "Congregational Ethics Polity." Both consider "proselytizing by Church of the Brethren district, congregational and pastoral leadership to be unethical."

In this context inviting or urging current Church of the Brethren congregations, members or leadership to join another denomination is deemed unethical.

We, the District join the Leadership Team in promoting the following:

- 1) We express our strong support for district and congregational leaders and members who remain loyal to the Church of the Brethren.
- 2) We encourage those who are unsure about remaining loyal to go directly to their district executives, and, if necessary, to denominational leadership, with any questions or concerns that are prompting them to consider leaving the denomination.
- 3) We offer guidance about ways to manage issues related to those who choose to leave.

In addition to these items of support and guidance we adopt the following best practices, as provided in the Leadership Team Update, for dealing with the above cited concerns of proselytizing, church membership and church leadership's involvement in individual, congregational and district withdrawal from an individual congregation or the District.

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⁶ References to, and excerpts are from: <https://www.brethren.org/news/2020/leadership-team-issues-update-in-response-to-activities-of-the-covenant-brethren-church/>

Responsibilities of District Leadership

District leaders are called to uphold the best interests of the Church of the Brethren as they live out our polity's expectations. Among those are that districts will "administer and coordinate the religious and business activities of the Church of the Brethren within the bounds of the district."

Therefore any district leaders - district board members in particular - who have voted in favor of the withdrawal of their congregation should resign their positions. Subsequently they will be replaced by a member of the district who is loyal to the Church of the Brethren. These actions should occur prior to any further action by the district board or any other leadership group.

In addition, a central responsibility of the district board is to provide care for the remnant of a congregation that wishes to remain loyal to the Church of the Brethren.

In the event our district board is itself divided, the denominational Leadership Team may be consulted to work with the district board.

When a congregation "by either majority or unanimous vote" makes the decision to withdraw from the Church of the Brethren, it "ceases to exist or function as a congregation of the Church of the Brethren" from the date of the vote. Therefore:

1. The portion that has voted to leave the district/denomination is no longer eligible to be represented by delegates at district or Annual Conference, since it is no longer a Church of the Brethren congregation.
2. The remnant of a withdrawing congregation, "whether a majority or a minority of its membership, which continues in unity with" the Church of the Brethren "shall be recognized as the lawful congregation" and be seated as delegates at a district or Annual Conference."
3. When a remnant does not remain, the district conference shall officially recognize that the congregation has left the Church of the Brethren as of the date the congregation voted to withdraw.

Responsibility of Pastors and Congregational Leaders

In response to urging and active invitations from competing denominations, occasionally some attempt to live out of two loyalties, aligning with the competing denomination without relinquishing Church of the Brethren credentials and/or membership. A choice must be made between the two denominations. Those who choose another denomination must resign promptly from membership and any leadership roles they may hold in the Church of the Brethren, Southern Pennsylvania District.

Pastors identifying with a withdrawing congregation should immediately notify their district ministry commission.

We continue to believe that the way ahead is through conversations that seek to discern God's purposes through the study of scripture and prayer, yearning for the

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Holy Spirit to reveal God's Will for our life and witness.

F. Additional Issues

The withdrawing congregation should consult appropriate legal counsel concerning all matters of reorganization.

The withdrawing congregation shall remove all references to the Church of the Brethren and/or the Southern Pennsylvania District from all church signage, electronic media; and printed media.

-Adopted by Southern PA District Board, meeting at the Wolgamuth Congregation, January 12, 2019. Terry G Smith, District Board Chair. Revised April 28, 2022. Revised May 14, 2022.