

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

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.

throughout the denomination for each 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 towards 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 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.”

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

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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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

4.1 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 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 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

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 Southern Pennsylvania District Church of the Brethren is hereby adopted.

GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONAL WITHDRAWAL
Southern Pennsylvania District Church of the Brethren
Adopted by the Southern Pennsylvania District Board – January 12, 2019

- 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.
 - 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 Southern Pennsylvania District Church of the Brethren. 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 below.

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.

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
_____ Signature and printed name of person casting ballot	
Prepared by the Southern Pennsylvania District	

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.

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.

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