

## **Query from the Southern Pennsylvania District, Church of the Brethren Clarification of Accountability Between Churches, Districts, and Annual Conference**

This query seeks a clarification of the process of accountability which should exist between individual congregations, districts, and Annual Conference decisions.

### **Historical Perspective**

1. The Brethren movement from its beginnings in 1708 has been a restorative movement. Our faith ancestors saw their new beginnings as an alternative to what they perceived as the lifeless faith of the established churches of their day. They desired a church that was passionate in love for the Lord and committed to following the Bible.
2. They blended Pietism & Anabaptism, seeking to take strength from each. This blending was a corrective to the tendency of Pietism to be "*anything goes*" where each person or group followed what they believed to be the Lord's leading; and the tendency of Anabaptism to drift into legalism. They rejected the "*I'll do it my way*" trend of the Pietists, seeking to balance freedom with the accountability and discipline of the Anabaptists.
3. They formed a system of church governance that follows neither a congregational model, where each congregation can do as it chooses, nor a presbyterian model, where a few leaders make the decisions for the Body. Their corrective was a church governance model based on Acts 15 where the Body, seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance and the counsel of Scripture, make decisions together. This model has guided us at the local level (Congregational Forum, Congregational Business Meeting, Council Meeting), at the district level (District Conference), and at the national level (Annual Conference). Men and women, young and old, laity and clergy, seek the mind of Christ together and make decisions that the individual parts are expected to follow.

*The Manual of Organization and Polity (December 2018) says of the Annual Conference delegate body, "It is the final authority of the Church of the Brethren in all matters of procedure, program, polity, and discipline."*

*The 2017 Annual Conference adopted the Report of the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives on the Authority of Annual Conference and Districts regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts which reaffirmed our mutual responsibility in "...recognizing Annual Conference enactments of the Church of the Brethren as having governing force in its life."*

4. Sometimes the decisions of Annual Conference are directed as counsel. Sometimes they are decisions expected to be followed in our life together, given as "*the final authority*" to our congregations. Some examples:

In 1958, Annual Conference, in a statement on "*Church Extension*," gave permission, for the first time, to congregations to celebrate Holy Communion apart from Love Feast. "*...congregations who so desire may extend their spiritual ministry by alternating the love feast with additional communion services.*" Many of our congregations do celebrate Holy Communion occasionally apart from Love Feast. Some others do not. Those who do not are not in violation of that 1958 statement that says congregations "*may*" do such.

Also in 1958 Annual Conference granted "*full and unrestricted rights to women in ministry.*" Across our denomination today hundreds of our Sisters serve with excellence in ministry. The 1958 statement did not say that every congregation *must* interview a woman in their pastoral search process. It did not say that every congregation *must* have a woman preach. Congregations who do not interview a woman for a pastoral placement and/or do not invite a woman to preach are not in violation of the 1958 decision.

In 1996 and 2008 Annual Conference passed careful guidelines in a statement called, "Ethics In Ministry Relations." This important paper is especially noteworthy in guiding the process for when ethical accusations are brought against a minister. Districts are not free to ignore this paper. All are expected to abide by this guidance.

In 2014, after years of hard work, Annual Conference passed "Ministerial Leadership Polity." This new polity carries sweeping changes to the process of credentialing ministers. Districts are not free to disregard these new procedures. These are expectations for all districts in credentialing new ministers.

### **Our Current Dilemma**

Currently however we have been in a "stuck" place since the 1983 Annual Conference statement, "*Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective*," especially as it regards homosexuality. In 2002, Annual Conference approved a paper entitled "*Licensing/Ordination of Homosexual Persons to the Ministry in the Church of the Brethren.*" In that paper it was stated, "*We understand that paper (1983) to conclude that homosexual practice is unacceptable behavior in the church and therefore implied to be sin.*" Furthermore, the 2002 paper concludes that it is, "*...inappropriate to license or ordain to the Christian ministry any*

*persons who are known to be engaging in homosexual practices...*" During the 2017 Annual Conference the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives said, *"Districts are strongly encouraged to review their policies, processes and procedures to ensure that they are in harmony with Annual Conference actions and decisions, replacing or removing these policies, processes, and procedures as necessary."* However, in spite of these clear statements from Annual Conference, which is the *"final authority"* of our Church, we have congregations and districts that are practicing something entirely in violation of Annual Conference decisions. This rebellious behavior is even impacting our attention to our Compelling Vision process. And across our denomination a number of faithful congregations have chosen to disassociate with the Church of the Brethren because of this lack of accountability.

Several of our Church of the Brethren national staff persons, when pressed on why this failure to abide by Annual Conference decisions is allowed to continue, have stated honestly that in the Church of the Brethren today there are no clear lines of accountability and responsibility for holding others accountable.

While it may appear that the questions of this query are similar to the 2016 query from the West Marva District, "Same Sex Weddings," and the response "The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts," passed by the 2017 Annual Conference (and referenced earlier in this query), the fact that there have seemed to be no substantial changes since then, the comments by national staff as to the lack of a clear understanding of responsibilities for holding districts accountable, and the urgency of numerous congregations separating or preparing to separate from our denomination, compel us to ask,

**Whereas** we are in this difficult situation, and

**Whereas** our national leaders have been honest in admitting that there is a lack of accountability responsibility in our current policies & procedures, we ask, as so often in our 300 years of life together as the Church of the Brethren, is a corrective necessary,

**Therefore**, the Southern Pennsylvania District proposes the following query:

**As a Body, does the Church of the Brethren need to do the hard work of assessing and redefining who shall be responsible within our governing structures for holding congregations and districts accountable for following Annual Conference decisions, and to what degree and with what methods are they held accountable?**