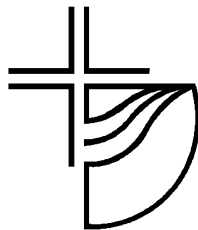


CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

Manual of
Organization and Polity

2010



Manual of Organization and Polity
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PREFACE

This manual (revised February 2010) draws together current organization and polity of the Church of the Brethren as approved by the Annual Conference. It supersedes the *Manual of Organization and Polity* that was published in 2001 and all subsequent on-line versions through 2008. An additional section has been added containing *procedures and policies* that do not fit the definition of polity, but are generally accepted by the denomination as standards by which we abide and operate. Direct authorization for the text is found in Annual Conference minutes, unless otherwise noted. In nearly all cases, actual quotations are used. Readers seeking additional information on a particular topic are directed to the full documents in Annual Conference minutes.

Notes lead the reader back to the appropriate reference in the Annual Conference minutes or to 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. In some cases, large sections of lengthy Annual Conference statements have been incorporated into the manual. These excerpts generally do not include introductory material and other sections that do not speak directly to organization and polity.

This edition of the polity manual includes new sections on each of the Annual Conference agencies. In some cases, the bylaws of these groups have been abbreviated to make the basic organizational information consistent for each of the agencies. The section on Annual Conference (Chapter 1) also includes a summary paragraph on each agency.

This current edition of the Manual of Organization and Polity is only available on-line. There are no plans to produce hard copies at this date. However, users are welcome to print their own hard copies from the PDF 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 that “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 General 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 General 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.” 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.”² 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.

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,³ 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.”⁴ In 1865 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.”⁵

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.”⁶

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.”⁷ And in 2004, Annual Conference delegates approved a report of a study committee on “Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions” that reaffirms this position. It states, “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.” The quotes are from the Minutes of Annual Conference 2000, p, 206; and the Minutes of Annual Conference, 1996, p. 331.

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.”⁸ 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 the 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

I. 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.¹¹

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” (Eph. 1:10).

Authority: The power to make and carry out decisions that are in accord with Annual Conference actions. 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 that 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 Cor. 16:15; Acts 6:1-6).

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."¹²

The following are basic guidelines in regulating church polity and authority.¹³

- The highest authority is God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. All human authority is judged with reference to this ultimate standard.
- Authority is exercised both formally through organizational structures and designated individuals 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.
 - 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.
- The principles of "voluntarism" in membership and belief and "no force in religion," which are firmly rooted in our tradition, make us avoid arbitrary patterns of enforcement that violate the freedom of individuals and local groups.
- 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.

- Openness to our brothers and sisters reaches from the 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 members of the body of Christ as the collective means for coming to know God’s will for the church?

II. 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. Beginning with the 1945 Conference, collections of the minutes have been issued in hardcover form every five years and can be purchased from the Brethren Press, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120. In addition, there are a couple of indexes of the queries and issues of the recorded Conferences. Researchers who may have interest in this aid are encouraged to contact the Annual Conference Office, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.

NOTES

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1. Donald F. Durnbaugh, comp. and trans., *European Origins of the Brethren* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1958), 115-120.
 2. 1849 Minutes (1778–1909), Article 40, 112.
 3. I Corinthians 12:14-31.
 4. 1853 Minutes (1778–1909), Article 26, 138.
 5. 1863 Minutes (1778–1909), Article 20, 222.

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6. 1968 Minutes (1965–1969), “The Frequency and Organization of Annual Conference,” 318.
 8. 1960 Minutes (1955–1964), “Election and Term of Service of Standing Committee,” 180.
 9. 1947 Minutes (1945–1954), “Brotherhood Organization,” 52-80.
 10. 1976 Minutes (1975–1979), “Brotherhood Understanding,” 205-209.
 11. 1968 Minutes (1965–1969), “Church Polity, Including Referendum on Merger and Coordination of Ecumenical Concerns,” 336.
 12. 1987 Minutes (1985–1989), “Revisions of Brethren Polity,” 482.
 13. 1968 Minutes (1965–1969), “Church Polity, Including Referendum on Merger and Coordination of Ecumenical Concerns,” 337.