

CHAPTER VII

CONGREGATIONS, DISTRICTS, AND CONFERENCES OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES AND PUERTO RICO ¹

I. Global Structure

A. PREAMBLE AND DEFINITIONS

1. The purpose of these polity guidelines is to enable the development of the Church of the Brethren as a global church. By this is meant the extension of the Church of the Brethren witness around the globe and the creation of close partnerships with emerging Brethren groups that enables two-way mission—and the mutual challenge and encouragement that this brings. It is assumed that such efforts will lead to the establishment of autonomous Brethren groups in different areas of the world; these should be seen as branches from the same vine whose ultimate rootage is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The polity that follows is intended to provide guidance so that the Brethren witness may be carried out with integrity and accountability, while allowing for a high degree of flexibility to accommodate cultural and social patterns, special needs, and problems not yet identified. It is also intended that there should be active participation by the new Brethren, new congregations, and international districts. Covenantal relationships with other church bodies and principles of indigenization, empowerment, and mutuality are to be honored in every situation.

2. As used in this document, these terms are defined as follows:
 - a. *New Brethren* are people residing outside the United States and Puerto Rico who wish to be members of the Church of the Brethren. These people are considered full Brethren, with their membership held in their congregation or fellowship, and eventually in the international district where they are located.
 - b. *New congregations* are congregations of new Brethren outside the United States and Puerto Rico. Such congregations could eventually cluster to form international districts.

- c. *International districts* are clusters of congregations of new Brethren initially recognized as districts and announced as such by US Annual Conference Standing committee. International districts will have the same kind of functions and responsibilities in carrying out their US counterparts. Relationships with the US Annual Conference will be maintained by exchanges of observers and visitors.
- d. *Regional conferences* are formed as districts expand their membership and activities and consequently wish to achieve a greater degree of autonomy from the US Annual Conference (itself a “regional conference” according to this terminology). The term “regional conference” is not intended to require that particular name, but is a possible title for the emerging structure. A regional conference might be formed by an association of districts located in a geographic region outside the US, such as “The Church of the Brethren in the Caribbean” or “The Church of the Brethren in Nigeria.” It might also be formed by association of another Christian body with the Church of the Brethren. A regional conference will organize itself in the way that facilitates its mission and ministry.
- e. *Global church* means to imply the spiritual community of Brethren regional conferences from different parts of the world. As regional conferences are formed as autonomous bodies, they should aim to maintain close fraternal relationships with other regional conferences; seek to be of one mind with other regional conferences as to matters of faith and belief; participate in periodic world assemblies of the Church of the Brethren; and, when appropriate, cooperate with other regional conferences for activities and programs such as disaster relief, leadership training, church planting, and ecumenical activities.

B. ESTABLISHMENT AND RECOGNITION OF NEW CONGREGATIONS

1. When there is a proposal to evangelize or to plant new congregations outside the US and Puerto Rico, those projects not initiated by the Church of the Brethren, Inc. shall be directed to the Mission and Ministries Planning Council (MMPC).
2. The Church of the Brethren should invest its spiritual and financial resources in mission projects that hold the potential for meaningfully extending the Brethren witness. All relevant data pertaining to the proposal should be considered.

Where the proposal involves an “adoption” of an existing fellowship, the following considerations shall also guide:

- a. The compatibility of the group and leadership with the beliefs, ideals, and practices of the Church of the Brethren.
 - b. Whether there are sufficient number of households and strength of leadership to maintain an ongoing program of worship, nurture, fellowship, and service.
3. Parameters of each mission partnership shall be defined by consultation and covenant prior to any fundraising. All fundraising shall be coordinated by the Church of the Brethren, Inc.
 4. Projects approved by the Church of the Brethren, Inc., including those recommended by the Mission and Ministries Planning Council, shall be reported to Standing Committee at its next meeting. Until such time as these should develop into autonomous national Brethren bodies, they will be reported to Standing Committee on a yearly basis. They shall be listed in the Church of the Brethren Yearbook (its alphabetical order by nation).

II. Leadership and Ministry Training

- A. Each mission project that is launched should have capable leadership on hand to give direction to work and witness. Ideally this would be indigenous leadership, with a mentor who has knowledge of and commitment to Brethren history, heritage, and polity. The appropriate Church of the Brethren, Inc. staff shall provide oversight for the project and facilitate open communication. In cases where there are multiple sponsors supporting a project, it is important that the role of the Church of the Brethren, Inc. staff be respected in order to prevent contradictory directions or mixed messages to the new congregations or their leadership.
- B. A plan for calling and recognizing people who will serve in set-apart ministry in each mission project shall be a part of the final proposal presented to the Mission and Ministries Planning Council and the Church of the Brethren, Inc. This plan shall remain in effect until the time when the mission project shall develop into an autonomous national Brethren body. The following steps shall be taken in granting ministerial status in the Church of the Brethren:
 1. An interview by a committee to be appointed by the director of Ministry and the director of Global Mission Partnerships, to be conducted in the

language of the candidate. When feasible the committee shall include representation from the mission project. At least one member of this committee shall be an ordained minister of the Church of the Brethren chosen for depth of experience and knowledge of ministerial polity and practice.

2. Licensing shall be preceded by at least one year of preparation and training except for cases involving transfer of ordination from a recognized denomination.
 3. Ordination or transfer of ordination shall follow the completion of the training course outlined below and shall not occur until at least one year has elapsed since licensing.
 4. A service of licensing or ordination to the set-apart ministry shall be conducted by Church of the Brethren, Inc. staff with assistance of others as appropriate.
 5. All licensings and ordinations shall be reported to the Church of the Brethren, Inc. and Standing Committee of Annual Conference.
 6. All ministers, ordained and licensed, shall be listed by country in the Church of the Brethren Yearbook until such time that indigenous structures are recognized.
- C. Training shall be provided for people called to set-apart ministry and other leadership positions in the new congregations. The course of study shall include Brethren history, heritage, and polity. Curriculum materials and instruction shall be offered in the language of the area. The outline and resources for the course of study shall be approved by a committee, which shall include the director of Ministry and the director of Global Mission Partnerships. This course shall at least approximate the Three-Year Reading Course. The cost of the training shall be included in the budget for the mission project. Ordination shall not occur before completion of the prescribed educational program.
- D. Issues of accountability, discipleship, and reconciliation shall be handled according to guidelines developed by the director of Ministry in consultation with the director of Global Mission Partnerships. These guidelines shall be subject to review by the Standing Committee of Annual Conference, which shall be the final arbiter concerning these.

- E. It will be necessary to make provision for variations and exceptions from denominational polity to accommodate special social, cultural, and other concerns. However, it is intended that even when exceptions and variations occur, denominational polity should be followed as closely as possible.

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1. 1998 Minutes (1995–1999), “World Mission Philosophy and Global Church Structure,” 765-768. See also 1993 Minutes (1990–1994), “Structure to Deal with Global Denomination,” 612-615.