

New Business Item #1

A Structural Framework For Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues

Background

The 2002 Annual Conference adopted the following recommendation of the Denominational Name Study Committee:

In light of the above process and findings, and considering the Denominational Name Study Committee's charge from Annual Conference "to respond to the queries on denominational name by promoting a denominational-wide dialogue and report its progress," the study committee recommends Annual Conference update the 1988 Annual Conference statement, "A Structural Framework for dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues," taking into consideration the 1999 Annual Conference schedule change, direction provided in the 1998 Annual Conference statement ("The New Testament as Our Rule and Practice"), and the insights gained through the Framework for Conversation process initiated by the Denominational Name Study Committee. Such a revision of the 1988 Annual Conference statement could provide a tangible tool for Annual Conference when faced with difficult and potentially contentious issues.

The 2002 Annual Conference then assigned the implementation of this recommendation to the Annual Conference Council, who in turn appointed a task committee to update the paper and to present a revision to Standing Committee as an item of new business.

RATIONALE FOR NAMING SPECIAL RESPONSE QUERIES

During the last three decades, the Church of the Brethren has addressed a number of issues that have been controversial among our constituency: *Scriptural Authority, Human Sexuality, Abortion, Taxation for War, Ministerial Credentialing, Denominational Name, and issues related to congregations upholding Annual Conference statements.* During this period we have learned that it is important to address our differences about such issues as early as possible. To uphold the unity of the body, it is important to have open and honest discussion.

The manner in which Annual Conference typically responds to queries sometimes circumvents the handling of controversy. Some members of the denomination are made aware of an issue and a possible solution for the first time when the statement appears in the Conference Booklet or when the item is before the Conference body. Our response mode has the potential for bringing a sense of winning or losing, a majority or minority report, or a statement that so compromises points of view by attempting to represent all views that it becomes less than useful.

The need, therefore, is to have alternative procedures for responding to controversial issues, which will provide an opportunity for open discussion of differences and at the same time offer the possibility for affirming points of convergence. The response procedure should encourage discussion and questioning at an early stage and eliminate the need to quickly adopt a paper to address the questions raised under the usual time pressures of Conference business.

Annual Conference in 2007 adopted a paper entitled, “Doing Church Business,” which provides suggestions for alternative ways of processing business. It is a resource available to the Conference officers for achieving the goals of this framework for dealing with strongly controversial issues.

The 1998 Annual Conference approved the statement, “The New Testament as our Rule of Faith and Practice” and reaffirmed the need for genuine and honest dialogue based upon our identity as a New Testament people. For as the New Testament calls us to base our conversation, moral reasoning, and actions in Christ, so it calls us to continue in a life of study and conversation that places collective understanding and spiritual insight above individual interpretation leading to an equal importance of faith and practice. That moves us as a faith community toward a respectful manner of conversation that recognizes there will be differences, but points us toward a higher expectation that there will be agreed-upon understandings and practices that reflect our unity in Jesus Christ.

When queries come before the Standing Committee, it would be appropriate for that Committee to reflect on the way in which differences within the denomination are addressed. This paper is an attempt to offer to Standing Committee procedures by which issues judged to be controversial can be processed so as to both address the concern and build community.

This paper suggests that a query which will generate adversarial stances because of deep feelings and strong differences of opinion be called a Special Response Query.

Special Response Queries are not more important than others; rather, the question requires a different approach. The Special Response is a process by which differences may be explored for our mutual benefit. A Special Response may require additional time and dollars to work through the process. We believe the procedure will take a minimum of two years, following its designation by Standing Committee as a special response query. The effort and expense will be justified for the following reasons:

1. The Church of the Brethren is committed to reconciliation. When there are deep differences among us, we should work for mutual understanding.
2. Sufficient discussion allows and encourages mutual understanding in regard to diverse opinions and experiences, limiting protracted and potentially destructive conflict.
3. Where people feel a part of the body, they will continue to support the life and work of the church. Dealing with controversial issues thoroughly and respectfully also reflects responsible stewardship.

GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES FOR DEALING WITH SPECIAL RESPONSE QUERIES

Annual Conference One

When a query comes to Standing Committee, Standing Committee will decide if it is a query which generates adversarial stances because of deep feelings and strong differences of opinion. If it is adjudged to be so, it will be called a Special Response Query and the procedure for Standing Committee is as follows:

1. Send the query for approval as a Special Response Query to Annual Conference.

Rationale: This will allow Annual Conference to identify it as one that will be processed differently from a standard query.

2. Standing Committee, with the assistance of its Nominating Committee, will call a committee of five persons who shall be the Resource Committee for the study of the issues. The committee will develop study materials and a discussion guide for use in congregations, districts, and denominational groups. The materials should include the biblical and theological aspects of the issue and should adapt as closely as possible the Framework for Conversation which follows in this paper. The committee will also prepare a bibliography of available resources for further study on the issue(s). These resources shall be made available by April 1 of the year following the committee's appointment.

The committee should be composed of persons who represent the diverse perspectives of those most closely affected by the query. At least one member should have special writing skills. All members should have broad-church experience, and there should be persons on the committee representing a broad spectrum of theological and biblical views in the denomination. Annual Conference delegates shall be invited to submit names and biographies of persons for consideration by the Nominating Committee.

3. Standing Committee members will facilitate hearings at the Conference following the one at which the query was designated a Special Response as well as conduct hearings within their own districts, beginning immediately following Annual Conference Two (see below). Each district shall determine the number and location of the hearings in its district to enable every congregation to be involved. Standing Committee delegates will have a training session on leading the hearings, arranged by the Conference officers, as a part of their pre-Conference Standing Committee meetings.
4. Standing Committee should entertain only one Special Response issue in any given year.
5. Standing Committee shall evaluate this process every five years.

Annual Conference Two

1. Annual Conference hearings shall be held for Special Response Queries one year following the acceptance of "Special Response Query" status on a particular issue. It is suggested that two hearings be held: one on the first evening of Conference and one on the last evening of Conference. Standing Committee members shall be responsible for holding these hearings. The hearings will allow for interaction and dialogue between delegates and Standing Committee members and help Standing Committee to gather information from Annual Conference participants.
2. Special Response issues will be scheduled in a regular business session to allow Standing Committee to report any significant developments regarding the process for dealing with the issue.

Annual Conference Three

1. Procedure for Presentation of Special Response issues on the floor of Conference.

Step 1. Following an introduction to the issue and an overview of the process, a Descriptive Presentation by Standing Committee (approx. 20-30 minutes) will follow. The moderator will remind the delegates that this is a special procedure. The moderator will direct them to the page in the conference booklet where it is described and will make clarifying comments as needed. The moderator then calls for the report of Standing Committee. At this time, the Standing Committee presentation will not include motions. It will include the findings of Standing Committee as compiled from the reports of hearings and other feedback (congregations, groups, Web site, etc.).

Step 1 allows for clarification of procedure. Standing Committee reports concerns which have arisen through the hearings and other conversations. The delegates have not only the report before them but also some of the history of the process.

Step 2. Presentation of Positions by Standing Committee (approx. 20 minutes).

Step 2 is intended to allow Standing Committee to present the key issues. The procedure is intended to model both speaking with intention and listening with understanding. In this process, the committee is representing not only themselves, but is seeking to summarize the views of the denomination.

Step 3. Open Sharing by Delegates (approx. 40 minutes).

The moderator will open the floor for questions and reflections. Questions and reflections will be limited to up to one minute per person. No motions are allowed. Reflections will be accepted using a “sandwich process” (10 minutes appreciation, 20 minutes concerns or changes, 10 minutes appreciation):

- a. First phase - Appreciation (10 minutes)
Reflections should begin with phrases such as:
“What I especially like about this paper is...”
“The strengths of this paper are...”
“I want to be sure this remains in the report...”
- b. Second phase - Concerns or Changes (20 minutes)
Reflections should begin with phrases such as:
“One thing which concerns me is...”
“What is unclear is ...”
“What I would like to add is...”
“What’s missing here is...”
“What I’d like to have deleted is ...”
“It would really help me if some change could be made in...”
“I believe it could be even better if...”

- c. Third phase - Appreciation (10 Minutes) Reflections should begin with phrases similar to first phase.

Step 3 allows delegates to express themselves on the issue. The focusing of the reflections is to encourage persons to begin to think of resolution as well as issue. Such a step is important because delegates need to begin to be involved in the dialogue and interchange before motions are allowed.

Step 4. Open Floor Dialogue (unlimited time). The procedure is as follows:

- a. The moderator will receive Standing Committee's recommendation to put the matter officially on the floor.
- b. After this motion, normal Annual Conference procedure (Robert's Rules of Order) will be temporarily suspended to pursue this process.
- c. The moderator will then hear from persons seeking to propose action. Only "declarations of intent to move" will be heard at this time. The format for speaking will be: "I intend to move the following... and my purpose in doing so is..."
- d. The moderator will then ask the delegates, by hand vote, to indicate whether they want to hear and discuss the proposed amendment or motion.
 1. If the majority votes no, the amendment or motion is not received.
 2. If the majority votes yes, the amendment or motion is received and Robert's Rules of Order for discussion and disposition are applied.
- e. Steps b, c, and d will be repeated until the delegates are ready to vote on the original motion of the committee as amended, or the report is otherwise disposed of.

Step 4 begins to deal with amendments and motions. It allows persons to present their ideas. It allows the delegates to say whether they wish to debate the idea. It shows respect for the individual and the community. The return to normal business procedure provides familiar ground for making the actual decision.

Step 5. Recognition of Participation. When the Special Response is completed, the moderator will address the delegate body speaking to the following matters:

- a. Summarizing the conclusion.
- b. Appreciating the process, the preparation, and the investment of all who participated.
- c. Encouraging caretaking of each other. In other words, the moderator will remind us of our relationship and our continuing responsibilities as a community of faith.

NOTE: An alternative to the above process for dealing with the resolution of the query in Year Two could be the discernment process suggested by the 2007 Annual Conference paper, "Doing Church Business." This could be combined with a method that works at consensus. Time and facilities may modify the process used.

FRAMEWORK FOR CONVERSATION

- A. The purpose of a framework is to have a conversation that is transparent in its process and broad in its invitation, fostering a spirit of openness, promoting community rather than uniformity, and understanding rather than debate.
- B. The following are the key elements in the Framework for Conversation, noting the intended function of each element and encouraging the form to extend from each committee's work.
- a. Welcome – Extend hospitality and appreciation to those in attendance, recognizing that differing opinions are present. Additionally, affirm the oneness of the body of Christ.
 - b. Scriptural focus – Provide a scriptural focus which calls us to base our conversations, moral reasoning, and actions in Christ's new covenant as revealed in the New Testament.
 - c. Importance of prayer – Open the conversation with prayer. Through prayer, invite and affirm God's presence in order to focus the conversation on God's will for us and the church.
 - d. Introduction – Form the context for the conversation, by providing an introduction to the process and the original query. Such an introduction includes actions of the Annual Conference and materials developed by the study committee, any precedent that may be helpful, and an overview of the proposed process.
 - e. Design questions for conversation – The Framework for Conversation consists of questions designed to provoke discussion, encourage understanding, and enable open and honest sharing. For example:
 - i. The first question initiates the process by inviting people to respond to a question for which everyone has an answer. The question establishes trust and creates the potential for deeper sharing later in the conversation. For example: What are you hearing about this query?
 - ii. The second and third questions (and more if needed) begin to draw out the differing opinions concerning the query. Questions reflecting all sides of the issue are critical in maintaining balance. Each question should elicit personal sharing and encourage the telling of stories and experiences. For example: Do you have any positive stories to share about _____? Do you have any negative stories to share about _____? What has been your experience with _____? What fears do you have concerning _____? What fears do you have concerning the _____ query?
 - iii. The fourth question encourages mutual understanding and empathy for another's opinion. For example: Can you imagine why a person of faith might have a different opinion about _____? If so, what would it be?
 - iv. The fifth question gives opportunity for participants to affirm our own individuality within the unity of the church. For example: How can we acknowledge different opinions/convictions while maintaining unity in the body?
 - f. Closing – Conclude with a summation, affirm people's participation, and provide an overview of the next steps in order to build ownership in the process. Close the conversation with the scriptural focus, a moment for silent reflection, and prayer.

C. The framework should be made available in a number of mediums (written, web, etc).

Appendix A

Church of the Brethren Annual Conference Framework for Conversation - Outline

- I. Welcome
- II. Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
- III. Prayer for a spirit of understanding
- IV. Introduction
The purpose of the hearings is to foster a spirit of dialogue, promoting understanding rather than debate. Today's conversation is one of many taking place in an ongoing process of discernment throughout the body. We invite your participation.
- V. Questions for Conversation
 1. What are you hearing about this query?
 2. Do you have any positive stories or experiences to share that would help our understanding of the issue?
 3. What are you fearful about, or could rejoice about, this issue being considered by our church?
 4. Do you have any negative stories or experiences to share about the subject of this query?
 5. Can you imagine why some might have differing perspectives about this issue? If so, what would those be?
 6. How can we acknowledge differing perspectives while maintaining unity in the body?
- IV. Closing
Hear again these words of Paul, written to the community at Corinth. (Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27)
Moment of silence
Closing prayer

Appendix B

Guidelines for Facilitators of the Framework for Conversation

The facilitator's role consists of:

- A. Creating a conducive environment for good discussion
- B. Keeping the group on task, but with some flexibility
- C. Ensuring equal access to participation by all group members
- D. Guiding the discussion to make the best use of the time available
 1. Set a relaxed but focused tone for the discussion. Be clear about the purpose, spirit, and process of the meeting. Explain your role as discussion guide, not participant. (Discipline

yourself to refrain from adding your own comments or expressions of agreement or disagreement with what is said.)

2. Affirm participants as they take part—this encourages more participation by others. Don't let one or two persons dominate the discussion; specifically invite comments from persons who have not spoken much ("I'd like to hear from some of you who have not spoken yet").
3. Ask clarifying questions to help participants explain more fully what they are saying. Encourage participants to ask each other questions for clearer understanding. Restating or paraphrasing briefly after someone speaks can also be helpful in clarifying.
4. When you are moving from one question to the next, summarize very briefly the comments or themes that emerged in discussing the questions you are just completing.
5. When the conversation gets off the topic, bring it back to the question at hand.
6. Encourage expression of all viewpoints present. Accept disagreement as normal and healthy, rather than as threatening. Encourage mutual respect in the midst of disagreement.
7. Keep track of the time and try to ensure that the group has a chance to talk about all of the questions.

(The facilitator's guidelines were provided by Bob Gross of the Church of the Brethren's Ministry of Reconciliation.)

Appendix C

Framework for Conversation—Facilitator's Reflection Form

(This form may also be completed immediately following the hearing and sent online at the Annual Conference page of the Church of the Brethren website, www.brethren.org)

Name of Special Response Query _____

Facilitator _____

Location of Event _____

Date of Event _____

Approximate Number of People Attending _____

Description of those in attendance (age, gender, etc.):

General Reflections:

Note: The above revision to A Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues was received and approved by the 2008 Standing Committee with a recommendation that it be adopted by the 2009 Annual Conference.

Action of the 2009 Annual Conference: The revised paper, A Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial issues, was approved by Conference delegates, with the inclusion of one amendment incorporated in the text above. This action supersedes the previous paper on dealing with controversial issues, passed by Annual Conference in 1988.