



Introduction

In 2009 June, delegates to the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference meeting in San Diego, CA approved submitting two items of business to the just passed *Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues*.¹ The two business items included *A Statement of Confession and Commitment*² produced by the 2008 Standing Committee and affirmed by the 2009 Standing Committee, and a *Query: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships*³. Literally moments since that action people have been wondering, “what does this mean?”

This timeline is an attempt to both answer that question, as well as provide a way of placing the current circumstances of this Special Response into the process proposed by the *Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues*.

Objectives

There are a number of objectives raised by the *Structural Framework* Paper that are important to keep in mind:

- “it is important to have open and honest discussion”⁴
- “to have alternative procedures for responding to controversial issues, which will provide an opportunity 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”⁵
- “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.”⁶
- “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.”⁷

Other Considerations

“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.”⁸

¹The text of the statement can be found in the 223rd Recorded Annual Conference Minutes, p. 231-40.

² 223rd Recorded Annual Conference Minutes, p. 244-45.

³ Ibid., p. 241.

^{4,5,6,7} Ibid., p. 231, 232

⁸ Ibid., p. 232.

Timeline for the current Special Response

Annual Conference One -- 2009 June 26-30, in San Diego, California

1. Annual Conference delegates took action to send the *Statement* and the *Same Sex Covenantal Relationships Query* into the Special Response process.
2. Standing Committee assembled a Resource Committee who “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 this paper [p. 200]. 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”,⁹ 2010.

Annual Conference Two -- 2010 July 3-7, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

3. “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 [*Saturday, July 3*] and one on the last evening of Conference [*Tuesday, July 6*]. 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.”
4. “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.”¹⁰
5. “Standing Committee members... will conduct hearings within their own districts, beginning immediately following Annual Conference [in Pittsburgh]. Each district shall determine the number and location of the hearings in its district to enable every congregation to be involved.”¹¹ “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 [in Pittsburgh].”¹²

Annual Conference Three -- 2011, July 2-6, in Grand Rapids, Michigan

There is a descriptive account of how these special items of business should then be handled by that year’s Annual Conference Officers and the Conference delegate body.¹³

Further Background Information

Since the conclusion of Annual Conference in San Diego in 2009 June, there have been a tremendous number of official conversations about the Special Response Process. Annual Conference Officers, Church of the Brethren Leadership Team members, Annual Conference staff, the appointed Resource Committee, Standing Committee’s named liaison to the Resource Committee (Jeffrey Carter), and staff of On Earth Peace and Ministry of Reconciliation have met in various configurations, in various places (New Windsor, MD; Elgin, IL; McPherson, KS; even in a van between New Windsor and Bridgewater, VA), and using various modes of communication (person-to-person, telephone and e-mail). There is a strong sense of commitment to seeing that the Process begins well, especially through communication to the denomination. By definition, since this is the first time the denomination is implementing the Process, it is precedent setting. Denominational leaders have taken this responsibility very seriously.

⁹ 223rd Recorded Annual Conference Minutes, p. 233.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 234.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 233.

¹² Ibid., p. 233.

¹³ Ibid., p. 234-6.

Before entering into the specific details of process, there were two fundamental conversations that occurred. First, what is the goal of this Process? In the simplest of terms, it is designed for us to handle, in a special and more intentional way, two (in this situation) items of business. These two items of business must eventually be addressed by Annual Conference delegates. While it is not a discernment process per se, the Process provides more space for us to hear God and one another, and to witness to the power of Christ's community to engage in a prayerful dialogue that does not emulate the partisan debates of the world. The Process is not intended to re-write the 1983 *Human Sexuality* Paper or denominational polity. At the end of the Process, recommendations could include reaffirming the 1983 Paper as the denomination's official statement, or reopening portions of the the 1983 Paper for reconsideration. Any recommendation that comes forth will be made by Standing Committee, and given to the delegates of Annual Conference for discussion and approval.

Second, what amount of time is required of us to do the Process well, remembering that the *Structural Framework* calls for this to be a "minimum of two years"? There was some discussion that a fuller conversation could ensue from having time to talk with one another in our districts, and then have more time to talk with one another between districts after reporting at Annual Conference in Grand Rapids, requiring an additional year beyond the "minimum of two years." In the end there was agreement, however, that the amount of quality conversation gained by an additional year did not outweigh the perceived expectations of the denomination from all perspectives regarding this being a two year process. The reality is that we are really involved in a process that includes one year of preparation (2009-10), and one year of conversation (2010-11).

Discussions about length of the process also led to discussions about what we as a denomination could realistically expect from this conversation. One person suggested, "There is no possible way Standing Committee can bring an answer that answers the query "yes" or "no" in a way that will unify the church. But what if there is a well-defined process of gathering information that is given to Standing Committee that says 'here's where we are as a church: we find that people differ in these ways and agree in these ways.' So Standing Committee could say, 'here's where we are brothers and sisters, and in light of that here are our recommended next steps'.... If we would have a conclusion that we are not ready yet to answer the question, then we also would have another part to say we need to forebear one another until we can achieve unity."¹¹

From this line of thinking, participants in the conversation began to identify the Process as "taking the temperature" of the denomination. Where are we as a body with regards to the issues presented us in these two items of business? The conversations that will be facilitated around the denomination will assist Standing Committee and the denomination as we strive to understand the places of unity in Christ in which we inhabit.

Further detailed information about the Process can be gleaned from the "Detailed Process Timeline Sorted by date" section below.

Detailed Process Timeline Sorted by date

2009 June 26 - 30 -- Annual Conference delegates initiate Special Response Process

2009 June 26 - 30 -- Standing Committee assembles a Special Response Resource Committee

2009 August - December -- AC Officers and CoB Leadership Team prayerfully discern the specifics of the process as they have emerged

2009 October - 2010 April -- Resource Committee meets to develop resources and bibliographies (first meeting 2009 October 12-13, second meeting 2009 December 16-17, including Standing Committee appointed liaison, Jeffrey Carter, and third meeting 2010 February 28-March 2)

2010 January -- meeting of Inter-Agency Forum (Leadership Team and heads of AC affiliated organizations) and the Council of District Executives, to include updating District Executives about the Process and this timeline and the District's important role in it

2010 April 1 -- materials of the Resource Committee available for denomination-wide distribution

¹¹ *Minutes of the Church of the Brethren Leadership Team*, 2009 October 19.

- 2010 June 29 - July 3** -- Standing Committee training, by the staff of the Ministry of Reconciliation, to coordinate and/or facilitate district hearings using the Resource Committee materials and the Framework for Conversation¹²
- 2010 June 29 - July 3** -- Standing Committee selects members of a committee to receive completed “Framework for Conversation -- Facilitator’s Reflection”¹³ forms
- 2010 July 3-7** -- Annual Conference Exhibit space for display of Resource Committee materials, and Brethren Press availability of Resource Committee’s bibliographical materials
- 2010 July 3** -- Annual Conference Special Response Hearing #1. The Resource Committee has suggested that this first hearing model the Bible study prepared by the Resource Committee to accompany the resources they have developed for denominational study
- 2010 July 4 or 5** -- The Special Response Resource Committee has asked for Insight Session time to present the materials they will have developed and the bibliography. The Mission and Ministry Board has shared one of their available insight session slots for this request to be granted. There is also a significant possibility that AC Officers will ask the Resource Committee to present the resources and bibliography during one of the Business Sessions, perhaps instead of, or in combination with the requested insight session. As the AC Agenda takes more shape, and in conversation with the Resource Committee, this decision will be made
- 2010 July 4, 5, or 6** -- Time is made available during Business Session for Standing Committee reporting on the Process, as needed
- 2010 July 6** -- Annual Conference Special Response Hearing #2. Officers and Leadership Team have envisioned that this hearing is intended for Standing Committee members to model how a district hearing will be facilitated, in order to help breed familiarity and comfortability with the district hearings among Annual Conference goers. Preparation for this hearing occurs during the Standing Committee training time during meetings just prior to Annual Conference
- 2010 July - 2011 February 28** -- Standing Committee members coordinate and/or facilitate hearings within districts utilizing the “Framework for Conversation - Outline” and “Guidelines for Facilitators of the Framework for Conversation”, and completing the “Framework for Conversation - Facilitator’s Reflection Form.”¹³ These forms are to be returned to the Annual Conference Office before 2011 February 28
- 2011 March - May** -- Standing Committee “form reception committee” receives “Facilitator Reflection” forms, and writes a summary report to Standing Committee. This report should be distributed to Standing Committee before Standing Committee meetings at the 2011 Annual Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At the discretion of Standing Committee, this summary report may be made publicly available
- 2011 June 29 - July 2** -- Standing Committee meetings in which “form reception committee” makes formal report and Standing Committee members craft their recommendations related to *A Statement of Confession and Commitment* and a *Query: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships*
- 2011 July 3, 4, or 5** -- Introduction of Standing Committee’s recommendations regarding the two items of business handled in the *Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues* Paper. These items are then handled as pieces of Annual Conference business using the format found in the *Strongly Controversial Issues* Paper¹⁴

Concluding Thoughts

As we seek to deliberate about two items of business before Annual Conference, it is important to model the way of Christ in our deliberations and dealings with one another just as much as we model the way of Christ in our decisions. May we enter into this conversation in a spirit of prayer and forbearance for one another.

Questions of clarification, or requests for more information may be directed to the Annual Conference Officers, via the Annual Conference Office: 800-323-8039; 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120; annualconference@brethren.org.

¹² 223rd Recorded Annual Conference Minutes, p. 236-40.

^{13, 13} Ibid., p. 239-40.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 234-6.