

Leadership Team issues update in response to activities of the Covenant Brethren Church

Church of the Brethren Newsline

September 14, 2020

Following is an update from the Leadership Team of the Church of the Brethren:

With the formation of the Covenant Brethren Church, discord and division are arising within our church body. This reality has accelerated in recent weeks, as the Covenant Brethren Church launched an official recruitment effort. Congregations and individuals are being invited and sometimes urged to join their denomination, including Church of the Brethren leadership and portions of congregations that are being divided over this movement. We view this activity as proselytizing. In the Church of the Brethren both our "Ethics in Ministry Relations" (1) polity and our "Congregational Ethics Polity" (2) consider such proselytizing by Church of the Brethren district, congregational, and pastoral leadership to be unethical.

While we respect the right of choice of individuals concerning their affiliation, the Leadership Team must address these serious efforts at promoting division within our church as we seek to preserve the integrity of the Church of the Brethren and our ministries in Christ.

We are also very concerned that these efforts include misinformation that misrepresents our denomination, whether intentional or not. In response, the Leadership Team feels compelled to 1) express our strong support for district and congregational leaders and members who remain loyal to the Church of the Brethren; 2) encourage those who are unsure about remaining loyal to go directly to their district executives, and, if necessary, to denominational leadership, with any questions or concerns that are prompting them to consider leaving the denomination; and 3) offer guidance about ways to manage issues related to those who choose to leave.

We acknowledge that our Church of the Brethren polity did not anticipate the need to specify procedures that we now find necessary in this time of division. As we have prayerfully pondered these extraordinary circumstances in partnership with district executives, we have developed what we believe are best practices essential for these times.

Responsibilities of district leadership

— District leaders are called to uphold the best interests of the Church of the Brethren as they live out our polity's expectation that districts will "administer and coordinate the religious and business activities of the Church of the Brethren within the bounds of the district." (3)

— Any district leaders—district board/leadership team members in particular—who have voted in favor of the withdrawal of their congregation should resign their position. They should be replaced by a member of the district who is loyal to the Church of the Brethren, prior to any further action taking place by that district board/leadership team or any other leadership group.

— A central responsibility of the district board/leadership team is to provide care for the remnant of a congregation that wishes to remain loyal to the Church of the Brethren. In the event a district board/leadership team is itself divided, the denominational Leadership Team stands ready to work with district board/leadership team members who are loyal to the Church of the Brethren to provide this care.

— District leaders should recognize that the portion of a congregation which votes to leave the district is no longer a part of the district nor of the denomination, as of the date the congregation voted to leave. Polity states that when a congregation "by either majority or unanimous vote" makes the decision to withdraw from the Church of the Brethren, it "ceases to exist or function as a congregation of the Church of the Brethren." Therefore:

a. The portion that has voted to leave the district/denomination is no longer eligible to be represented by delegates at district or Annual Conference, since it is no longer a Church of the Brethren congregation.

b. The remnant of a withdrawing congregation, "whether a majority or a minority of its membership, which continues in unity with" the Church of the Brethren "shall be recognized as the lawful congregation" and be seated as delegates at a district or Annual Conference. (4)

c. When a remnant does not remain, the district conference should officially recognize that the congregation has left the Church of the Brethren as of the date when the congregation voted to leave.

Responsibility of pastors and congregational leaders

— Pastors and congregational leaders also have a responsibility to uphold the best interests of the Church of the Brethren. This is identified in our baptismal vows, when we covenant to be “loyal to the church, upholding it by our prayers and our presence, our substance and our service.” (5) For pastors, it is also required by their ordination vows: “Do you affirm your devotion to the church of Jesus Christ, and specifically to the Church of the Brethren, which calls you to ministry? And do you promise to live in harmony with its principles, ordinances, and doctrines, being at all times subject to its discipline and government?” (6) These vows bring us into sacred covenants with God and with each other in the Church of the Brethren that our ministerial and congregational ethics polity documents call us to maintain. (7)

— With the emergence of the Covenant Brethren Church, some are attempting to live out of two loyalties, aligning with the Covenant Brethren Church without relinquishing Church of the Brethren credentials and/or membership. Such duality is not wise or healthy. A choice must be made between the two denominations. Those who choose the Covenant Brethren Church must resign promptly from any leadership roles in the Church of the Brethren. (8)

We recognize that district boards/leadership teams have established procedures regarding the termination of ordinations. Pastors identifying with a withdrawing congregation should immediately notify their district ministry commission.

Position on dual ordination

— One reflection of the dual loyalties noted earlier is the assumption by some that pastors can be ordained in both the Covenant Brethren Church and the Church of the Brethren. It is important to clarify that dual ordination is only possible in our polity when an individual is serving “an approved ministry in his or her own denomination and an approved ministry in the Church of the Brethren.” (9) Because one of the crucial requirements for credentialing ministers from another denomination includes a commitment “to teach and uphold the beliefs, practices, and polity of the Church of the Brethren,” (10) we would expect that people who are participating in efforts to separate from the Church of the Brethren would not be approved for further ministry in the Church of the Brethren.

Position on dual affiliation for congregations

— Another reflection of dual loyalties is the assumption by some that congregations can be affiliated with both the Covenant Brethren Church and the Church of the Brethren. Not only would that require approval by a Church of the Brethren district board, but Church of the Brethren polity expects that a congregation affiliating with the Church of the Brethren will respect, support, and encourage those who “covenant 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.” (11) We would not expect this to be possible for those who have decided they cannot be church together with the Church of the Brethren.

We are primarily concerned that leaders within the church act with integrity in our life together as the Church of the Brethren, as we live out our calling as the Body of Christ. Jesus calls leaders for the church to “equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13, NIV). We pray that district and congregational leaders will be faithful to this high calling.

The Leadership Team stands ready to assist district leadership in working for unity through a common commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We continue to believe that the way ahead is through conversations that seek to discern God’s purposes through the study of scripture and prayer, yearning for the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s will for our life and witness.

The Leadership Team of the Church of the Brethren:

General secretary David A. Steele

Moderator Paul Munday

Moderator-elect David Sollenberger

Annual Conference secretary James M. Beckwith

Council of District Executives representative Cynthia S. Sanders