

Query: A Congregation Requests Relief from an Irreconcilable Disagreement with Its District

Whereas the Apostle Paul taught that “we, who are many, are one body in Christ and individually we are members of one another” (Romans 12:5; all biblical citations NRSV); “that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (I Corinthians 1:10); and that we should “bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1).

Whereas God has commanded us “to go into all the world and proclaim the good news” (Mark 16:15), to let our light shine like a city on a hill, rather than hiding it under a basket (Matthew 5:14–16), and to bear fruit on our vine (John 15:1–8).

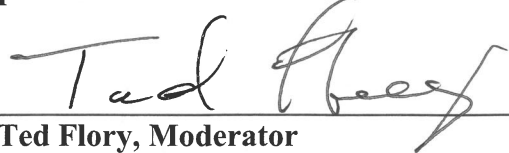
Whereas the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren (“the Congregation”) has struggled to no avail to reconcile its desire to let its light shine while trying to remain united in the same mind and purpose as the Shenandoah District (“the District”). The Congregation believes that in Christ we are one body and that we are members of one another. Thus, the Congregation and its members participate in District disaster efforts, including trips and the relief auction, support and provide volunteer leadership to the District camp, and serve in District leadership roles. The Congregation has hosted District conferences and meetings, is willing to do so again, donates financially to the District, and prays for the District during worship. The Congregation’s mission, its fruit-bearing method, calls for “an inclusive family of faith” (8/25/2013), and authorizes its pastors to officiate same-sex weddings (5/3/2015). This mission clashes with the District’s subsequent resolution, which bans “ordained or licensed ministers ... from performing or officiating any same sex marriage” and “the use of Shenandoah District buildings, camps, properties, or churches for the use of same sex ceremonies” (“Shenandoah District Church of the Brethren Resolution on Same-Sex Marriage” 11/5/2016).

Whereas since 2015 this disagreement has led to acrimony, division, and District-imposed discipline on the Congregation. The District issued a letter of reprimand to a Senior Pastor of the Congregation and revoked the ordination of an Associate Pastor. An Annual Conference paper “Query on Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions” (2004) calls for districts to “put in place a framework for processing a congregational disagreement with an Annual Conference decision,” but also states, that after due process, if the goal of reconciliation is “unattainable”... “an acknowledgment should be made that the congregation continues supporting the larger church in other aspects of its life while disagreeing with Annual Conference in the particular matter.” Instead, the District designed “A Framework for Dealing with Congregations in Disagreement with Annual or District Conference Decisions” (11/5/2016) that threatens “separation” of the Congregation from the District.

Whereas a Working Group comprised of representatives from the Congregation, the District, and the denomination was charged with devising a creative, outside-the-box solution to the disagreement, but even though the group met four times during 2022-2023 in a spirit of love, harmony, dialogue, and problem-solving it was not able to effect a resolution of the conflict.

Therefore, the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren humbly asks Annual Conference if there are measures that can relieve a congregation that holds its district in love, will not abandon its mission, suffers an irreconcilable disagreement with its District, is threatened with District sanction, and has exhausted attempts at reconciliation?

Adopted by the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren at its May 5, 2024, Church Council Meeting, and passed on to the Shenandoah District.



Ted Flory, Moderator



J. Michael Fike, Chairperson, Board of Administration



Peggy Lineweaver, Clerk