**Review and Evaluation of Business Item #4: The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations and Districts**

The Leadership Team had a difficult task assigned to it, and worked hard at being faithful to that task in a relatively short time.

We appreciated the team’s careful review of current Annual Conference Statements and Polity that address questions of authority and accountability. The genius and the frustration of Brethren thinking and being is evidenced in the report’s description of the delicate dance that occurs between forbearance, individual conscience, community authority, and accountability in the struggle to determine the mind of Christ for our times. These tensions require movements between majority perceptions and minority dissent, strict rules and prophetic openness, unwavering judgment and hopeful mercy. They demand tenacity, a commitment to relationship, a tolerance for ambiguity, and a willingness to trust in the best intentions of each other.

The descriptive nature of the report shifts on page 9 and raises the following concerns:

**1. New Polity is Established**

Polity reflects the procedures by which the church conducts its business. It is our agreed upon rules of conduct and practice. Because polity establishes this common ground, changes in polity are serious endeavors that usually require two distinct votes in two separate years, with the final change requiring a two-thirds majority.

Although not directed by Annual Conference to do so, the report moves to the matter of same sex weddings beginning on page 9. Several assertions are made:

a. At *this time, ministers and congregations are not authorized by Annual Conference to perform same sex weddings*. Interestingly, Annual Conference has never authorized **any** weddings and the language of the amendment to the 1983 Paper on Human Sexuality does not specify polity on this question. Instead, it is a position of the church. This might seem a trivial point, but there are important differences between polity and position.

*b*. A *majority of the delegate body is clearly opposed to homosexual covenantal relationships*. This assumes knowledge that the Leadership Team simply does not have. To our knowledge, no study has been commissioned to determine this information.

These unjustified assertions are used to move towards a “solution.” The report confusingly vacillates between ministerial conduct and misconduct and then names specific procedures that are to be followed if a pastor performs a same sex wedding. The District Ministry Commission is vested with the authority to determine what happens with the pastor. This is clearly polity; it lays out specific rules, procedures, and paths of authority that are to be followed when/if a pastor performs a same sex wedding. The Leadership Team and District Executives have overstepped their assignment.

In the follow up document *Frequently Asked Questions,* the Leadership Team indicated that the process used in responding to pastors who officiate at same sex weddings is “standard practice” used by District Executives. However, what is this “standard practice”? When was it implemented? Who had input? How was it communicated? In what situations has it been used in the past? It becomes immediately clear that this is something new, and that, despite Leadership Team claims to the contrary, this practice exists for nothing else besides marriage equality.

Given that pastors can lose their credentials and even their livelihood through this process, this is a very serious move. More specifically, it establishes procedures that will disproportionately punish progressive pastors and congregations.

**2**. **The Report Implies that Polity Permits Expelling Congregations**

As noted in their FAQ, denominational polity does not speak of expelling congregations, although this term was used in the report. The Leadership Team recommends replacing expel with “disorganizing,” yet offer no indication as to any real difference. Disorganizing congregations has only come at the request of the congregation itself because of dwindling numbers or an inability to maintain upkeep on a property. We know of no instance when it was forced upon a thriving congregation because of theological differences. Introducing “disorganizing” as a way to expel congregations for supporting same sex marriage establishes a chilling precedence that distorts the polity intent of ‘disorganizing’.

**3.  The Sole Recommendation, that the Leadership Team and CODE Develop “A Compelling Vision” for the Church, is Problematic.**

The Council of District Executives is not recognized within Brethren polity. In addition, the tasks of the Leadership Team as outlined in the COB Polity Manual do not include the charge to discern a vision for the church. This appears to be overreach on the part of the Leadership Team and CODE.

However, there remains a larger problem beyond polity. The recommendation seems to indicate that discovering a “compelling vision” will somehow enable us to leave behind the tensions and division reflected in our current struggles. Not only is this unlikely, but it ignores the very real possibility that we are precisely where the Spirit is calling the church to be at this time. Vision does not magically appear via a committee meeting. Rather, vision is birthed on the margins. It is born out of the hard work of uncomfortable tension, tenacious struggle, intrepid imagination, and risk-taking hope for the sacred work of love and liberation. This is what we as welcoming congregations have learned in our four decades on this journey. Our decisions and actions have not been casually or carelessly enacted. Rather, they have reflected thoughtful discernment and honest wrestling with what it means to be a people of God who practice justice, love kindness, and desire to continue the bold and disrupting work of Jesus. As a result, we are living into a compelling vision of church that feels healthy, strong, compassionate and full.

Forming a committee to develop a “compelling vision” is more a distraction than a solution. As a welcoming community, our task is continue to creatively and lovingly support and care for one another, inviting others to join us as we continue to risk and act for the sake of our gospel vision.

**For these reasons, the SCN Steering Committee recommends that delegates vote NO on Business Item #4.**