

RESPONSES TO THE “QUERY QUESTIONNAIRE” OF THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHERN ANNUAL CONFERENCE REGARDING THE PROPOSED QUERY, “REGARDING GREATER CONGREGATIONAL LATITUDE ON MATTERS OF SEXUALITY”

This proposed query came about following the 2023 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, when moderator Tim McElwee directly named in his remarks to Standing Committee and in his sermon during Annual Conference worship the need for a better way forward in dealing with matters of sexuality in the church. He said, for example, that Annual Conference statements have historically been “invitations to agree rather than mandates to obey.”

His words brought together with sharper clarity some threads of concerns that had existed for some time for several congregations in the Illinois/Wisconsin District. Those concerns were heightened for some earlier this year by a case in which ordination was taken away from a pastor in Virginia District due to that pastor performing a same-sex wedding. There were concerns both for the hurt that occurred in that particular case (and earlier ones) as well as for future ramifications elsewhere in the church.

Discussions followed between several individuals in the district, including the district executive, and eventually moved to the boards/leadership teams of the York Center and Highland Avenue congregations. Some exploration of scripture and of past Annual Conference statements were included. Those discussions led to a desire to formulate something more specific for our polity and practice, and something that would provide greater guidance going forward and hopefully mitigate future harm to clergy. As noted in the text of the query, districts have varied widely in their enforcement of rules regarding sexuality (or lack thereof). In the past decade, at least three districts have removed ordinations from pastors for performing same-sex weddings, for example, while others have exhibited widespread tolerance, and at least one district is a member of the Supportive Communities Network.

As ordinations are held by districts but are effectively denomination-wide credentials, with clergy free to move from one district to another, a pastor (or other clergy member) should not be held to one set of standards for their ordination in one district and a different set in another. As pastors are called to serve a wide variety of congregations with different understandings of theology and living out faith, some level of flexibility would seem to be needed in the ways they carry out their ministry. Better guidance would also prevent district executive ministers from being put into difficult situations where multiple expectations or inconsistencies might exist.

This is not a new question here. In the Illinois/Wisconsin District, several congregations (including York Center, which ultimately initiated this query, and Highland Avenue, which has been helpful in and supportive of its development) have undertaken long discernment processes around issues of sexuality and inclusion in the past 20 years, delving into scripture and Brethren history, holding intensive rounds of conversation and communication, and carefully crafting decisions to become open and affirming congregations.

Not everyone in those congregations was on exactly the same page about the issues discussed, but few left the congregations as a result of those processes and decisions. The processes instead created a greater sense of identity and resolve in those congregations' understandings of how they engage their communities based on their interpretation of scripture and the Spirit's ongoing leading. Some new members also joined the congregations as a result of those decisions and their resultant witness.

The district also undertook a process in the middle part of the last decade to explore this issue, with a potential query at that time exploring whether to take a stronger stance against pastors and congregations that went against Annual Conference statements related to sexuality. The end result of the discussion, however, saw that direction turned down, with a general sense that this district has usually taken a "live and let live" approach of mutuality in regards to congregational practice, as the district's three dozen or so congregations and projects range widely along the theological spectrum yet generally still appreciate being together and engaging in ministry together. There are disagreements and divergences at times, but not to the point that they tear us apart or force conformity.

This has generally worked well for the Illinois/Wisconsin District, and for some others in the denomination, and it feels as though naming this as a broader practice could be helpful for our overall denominational life—especially given the current uneven practices from district to district noted earlier.

Now more than 40 years past the 1983 Annual Conference statement on Human Sexuality, we have—as Tim McElwee observed—come no closer to a resolution on how to move forward as a church. Rather than a constant competition for one side or another to "win," it seems time to move to a place that allows greater latitude in practice, even as we seek to continue to walk with Jesus Christ together. As noted in the text of the query, this seems to be a biblical model, as well, as espoused by the Apostle Paul, among others, and as demonstrated by Jesus' constant warnings against overzealous legalism.

The forementioned congregational and district discernment processes that have occurred in Illinois/Wisconsin were helpful in shaping the thinking for this query process, and a few of the relevant scripture passages and historical understandings are noted in the query. It is the hope of York Center and others involved in this process that discernment around this question and a possible route forward might lead our denomination to a place where less energy is spent on infighting, campaigns for positions, and judicial processes, and instead to one where our energy is focused on living out the call of Christ as best we can with the gifts and understandings we have been given.