

THE PREPARATION AND PROCESSING OF QUERIES IN THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN. Updated October 1997 (number 040302)

Foreword

The **query** is the recognized method in the Church of the Brethren for raising concerns and securing answers for those concerns. All queries are processed through the Annual Conference and answers to queries have far reaching effects in the life and future of the Church of the Brethren.

In several actions throughout the years, Annual Conference has established procedures for the preparation and processing of queries. These actions provide an equitable and consistent process for all members of the Church of the Brethren who have concerns to raise.

This brochure, "The Preparation and Processing of Queries in the Church of the Brethren," has been prepared as a guide through the query process. It is a summary of current Annual Conference actions that define query procedures. Refer to this brochure as questions arise within the church.

Prepared by the Annual Conference Secretary

PREPARATION AND PROCESSING OF QUERIES

The Right to Raise Questions and Seek Answers

Any member of the church, or any congregation, has a right to raise questions and concerns that relate to the Christian life or to the mission and work of the church. Counsel and help may be sought from the pastor of the local church board, the district executive or the district board or commissions, the General Board, or the General Board staff. When an adequate and satisfactory answer to an important question cannot be found in any of the above channels, a query may be formulated to go to Annual Conference.

(Minutes 1965-1969, p. 317)

Types of Questions That May Go to Conference for Consideration

Distinction should be made between different types of questions and concerns. Legislative action by the highest deliberative assembly of the church is not necessarily the most helpful answer to many concerns that we may have.

1. Changes in church polity will always need to be made through legislative action. Even so, extensive study and consultation should occur locally, and in the district and General Offices, before taking time in the business session of Conference to get an answer.
2. Statements on the Christian life and witness, moral problems and positions are usually intended to influence personal and group habits of thought and action. Education and motivation are much more effective than legislation. The General Board and the staff are already working in these areas and have available literature and program resources. All available resources on any such question should be carefully studied before formulating a

- query to Conference. Legislative action on such issues should be used only occasionally.
3. Matters of church program and administration do not usually require legislative action. The church employs a staff to assist the local congregations in program and administration. Books, literature, and program materials are constantly made available to the churches for their use. Such church periodicals as the *Messenger* and *Brethren Life and Thought* provide opportunities to communicate and debate new ideas concerning the church program and administration. An appeal for new legislative action should be made only when an adequate hearing or action has not been achieved in these other areas.

On any matter when legislation by the Conference is felt to be necessary, a query is the means to follow. A query may originate in the local church, in the district, in the General Board, or in the Standing Committee. (Minutes 1965-1969, p. 317)

Query Procedures

The following procedures should be followed in the preparation and the processing of a query.

1. In the local church: When a member presents to the local church's board or council meeting a question or concern that merits consideration, the local church should, when it seems appropriate, appoint a working committee to do the following things:
 - a. Define and state clearly the question or concern.
 - b. Evaluate and try to answer the concern through research and inquiry.
 - c. Confer with the district secretary and General Board staff to get information as to what has been done or is being planned in regard to this matter.
 - d. If it is a new concern, the district and General Board staff person should be consulted regarding what immediate action might be taken, or whether Conference legislation would be helpful or necessary.
2. In the district: Whenever possible the district should answer the question or concern presented in the query.
 - a. The query should be reviewed by the district board, or the district can appoint a committee to investigate the merits of a query, hold hearings to evaluate different sides of the question, and seek to find a satisfactory answer.
 - b. If a satisfactory answer is not found, and the district conference feels that the query merits legislative action by Annual Conference, or if the concern or question of the query relates to denominational or general church matters directly, the district may send the query on to Annual Conference.
 - c. When a district board or district conference initiates a query, steps should be taken to assure that the concerns expressed in the preceding procedures are observed.
 - d. The district secretary should send copies of the query to the secretary of Annual Conference and to the Annual Conference Executive Director, accompanied by a letter of explanation of the origin of the query, and actions taken on the query up to that point. (The printing deadline is February 1.)
3. In the denomination: Queries which have been processed according to the above procedures shall be listed by the Conference officers for consideration by Annual Conference.

(Minutes 1965-1969, pp. 426-427)

Note: In 1991 Annual Conference adopted a Standing Committee recommendation "... that current polity be interpreted so that any query arising from a congregation or from a district board must be approved by a district conference in order to be accepted by Standing Committee as an item of business; ..." (*Minutes* 1991).

Recommendation for Preparation of Queries

The query should always state clearly the issue, remain open-ended for the widest possible base of judgment and response, and include some of the factual details by which to identify it. The following specific suggestions may prove to be helpful. The query should

1. Give the full name of the congregation or official body in the district initiating the query.
2. State as precisely as possible the issue concerning which the query is being presented.
3. Give briefly the principal reasons or conditions which prompted the query.
4. Avoid giving answers or proposing a solution to the problem raised by the query, leaving these rather to the outcome of the Annual Conference action. A proposal may be offered but in the awareness that study may lead to another outcome.
5. Give the date on which the query was initiated by the congregation or the official body in the district.
6. Indicate the district conference (and the date and location of the meeting) through which it hopes to have the query passed to Annual Conference.
7. Have appended the names and positions of the officials of the congregation or official body which is the source of the query.
8. Have attached the action and the date of the district conference and the name of the district moderator and conference secretary, if the action is to pass the query to Annual Conference.

Queries coming from the Standing Committee will follow as many of the above specific suggestions as apply.

(*Minutes* 1965-1969, p. 60)

Conclusion

The officers of Annual Conference shall list queries for consideration by Conference which in their judgment have fulfilled the preliminary steps. (*Minutes* 1965-1969, p. 318-319)

The Standing Committee of Annual Conference, fulfilling its legislative functions, studies all queries and items of new business and recommends answers to the delegate body.

(*Minutes* 1965-1969, [p. 318])

Over the years, a variety of ways of recommending actions regarding queries has evolved. The following is a summary of some of the options to be followed by Standing Committee:

1. Recommend that the query be adopted.

This presupposes that the concern of the query and the method of implementation is approved by Standing Committee.

2. **Recommend that the query be approved and that the query be . . .** (some alternate referral of the query for implementation than that stated in the query). Standing Committee may agree with the concern of the query but recommend a different way of working with it.

3. Recommend that the query be returned.

If for any reason Standing Committee does not feel it appropriate for Annual Conference to consider the query, it can recommend that the query be returned with a letter of explanation from Standing Committee stating the reasons for the return.

4. Recommend that a part of the query be handled in some way.

This is the course to take if Standing Committee agrees with a portion of the query but not with the entire concern.

5. Recommend that a new item of business be initiated to cover a concern recognized by Standing Committee as represented in a returned query and which should be considered.

6. Recommend that the query be adopted as a "Special Response Query". This response presupposes that the "query will generate adversarial stances because of deep feelings and strong differences of opinion".

Note: The process related to dealing with Special Response Issues is to be tried through three Special Response issues and then evaluated by Standing Committee before becoming policy.

(Minutes 1988, pp.674-681)

7. There will be a periodic review of the query response process by Standing Committee.

The delegate body of Annual Conference can:

1. Adopt the recommendation of Standing Committee.
2. Modify the answer of Standing Committee by amendment.
3. Reject the recommendation of Standing Committee and formulate its own answer.

(If the final answer presented in response to a query is totally rejected by the Conference, the query shall be regarded as unanswered, and shall be immediately disposed of as though it were an item of new business.) (Minutes 1965-1969, p. 260)

The final decision regarding a query made by the delegate body of Annual Conference is the directive which is followed.

QUERY PROCEDURE CHECKLIST

The Query is the time honored method of raising concerns and securing answers for those concerns through the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren. Procedures have been established for the preparation and processing of Queries. These procedures may be found in the *Minutes* of the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren, 1965-1969 on page 60, pgs. 317-319; and pgs 426-427.

To ensure that your Query is processed through the proper procedure, the checklist below is to be completed by the local church and the district. This form is to be sent with the substance of the Query when it is submitted to the Annual Conference secretary.

LOCAL CHURCH (Check [X] when the item has been completed)

- 1. The question or concern has been clearly defined and stated.
- 2. We evaluated and tried to answer our concern through research and inquiry.
- 3. We conferred with our district executive to get information as to what has been done or is being planned in regard to this matter.
- 4. We conferred with General Board staff to get information as to what has been done or is being planned in regard to this matter.

Our concern is a new one for the Church of the Brethren. Therefore:

- 5. We consulted our district executive regarding any immediate action that might be taken or whether Conference legislation would be helpful or necessary.
- 6. We consulted the General Board staff regarding any immediate action that might be taken or whether Conference legislation would be helpful or necessary.

Date _____ Church of the Brethren

Moderator _____

Clerk/Secretary _____

(over)

DISTRICT; (Check [X] when item has been completed)

- 1. The District Board reviewed this query, did all in its power by investigating the merits of the query and evaluating the different sides of the question in an attempt to seek a satisfactory answer, and passes the query on to the District Conference.
- 2. The District Conference is unable to answer this question and believes it merits the legislative action of the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference. The District Conference also finds that the question relates to denominational and general church matters directly and therefore sends the query to the Annual Conference.

SPECIAL NOTES: If the District Board or District Conference initiates the query, it should complete the section for the local church to ensure that the concerns expressed in these procedures are observed. *Only queries passed through the District Conference will be accepted by the Annual Conference secretary for presentation to the Annual Conference.* (1991 Annual Conference action)

Date _____

_____ District

Moderator _____

Clerk _____

The following items are to be mailed to the Annual Conference secretary with a copy to the Annual Conference Executive Director.

- Query
- Query Checklist
- Letter of explanation of the origins of the query
- List of actions taken on the query to this point