

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

THE SHALOM TEAM

I. INTRODUCTION

The survival of a congregation is dependent on its ability to identify key issues of the faith community and to discern constructive, rather than destructive, responses to them. It often marks a turning point in the life of the faith community—a point from which it becomes stronger or a point marking its decline. How congregations handle conflict is almost always one of those turning points. Indeed, for many congregations today, the single most important issue determining its health, even survival, is how the congregation handles significant differences—whether those differences are difficult decisions yet to be made or differences that have already grown into open conflict.

It is the acknowledgment of this reality that provides a window of opportunity for the Church of the Brethren to practice what it preaches as a peace church; to learn how to make dealing with conflict and potential conflicts a congregational priority; and to appreciate the wondrous works a faith community can accomplish when it is not preoccupied with its own internal differences.

A. Query Background

The 2000 Annual Conference received two queries asking that the 1977 “Discipleship and Reconciliation” paper be reviewed in light of the significant changes in our church and the wider society in the twenty-five years since it was passed. One query noted the difficulty in several districts of maintaining viable Discipleship and Reconciliation committees (D&R committees) consistent with the vision of the 1977 paper. Both queries specifically asked for clarification of the relationship within districts between the D&R Committee and the newly formed Ethics Committee.¹ This paper addresses those concerns and offers a new model, the Shalom Team, which can help equip the Church of the Brethren for ministry in the twenty-first century.

B. Findings of the Study Committee

1. **Changes in the Church of the Brethren.** The radical changes in the past quarter century in churches and in the culture have required denominations, including our own, to rethink how they can best serve congregations and their needs. The Church of the Brethren has developed resources and adopted polity that have drastically altered the ecclesiastical context in which the “Discipleship and Reconciliation” paper was written. Annual Conference has adopted Ethics papers for both congregations and the set-apart ministry. The General Board has restructured, resulting in the development of a network of Congregational Life Teams (CLT) to

1. Details of the Ethics Committee are found in the 1996 Annual Conference paper “Ethics in Ministry Relations.”

provide resources for the strengthening of congregations. Also since 1977, the Ministry of Reconciliation and its Practitioner's Network have evolved and serve as prime resources for conflict transformation. These changes require a rethinking of conflict in the Church of the Brethren and the church's response to it.

2. **Relationship to the Ethics Papers.** While not every district has had a Discipleship and Reconciliation Committee, every district now has an Ethics Committee. While the ethics process is designed for and works best in dealing with allegations of sexual misconduct, it nonetheless provides a helpful touchstone—one held in common across the denomination—for understanding the nature of any ethical norm and obligation and the accountability that comes with these. In that sense the Ethics papers serve a discipline function in the church that may have been formerly carried by the Discipleship and Reconciliation Committee. It is the intent of this paper to present a new and parallel model and process to serve a primarily reconciliation function for the church. This paper, therefore, upholds the distinction between ethical issues and other issues that affect the health and well-being of the church. The study committee acknowledges that there is a “gray area” in which those issues overlap and urges ongoing assessment of how the ethics process and the process outlined in this paper can best work together.
3. **The Limitations of the D&R Process.** The interviews and surveys conducted by the study committee confirmed that members of D&R Committees have been dedicated people committed to bringing transformation to conflict situations. That research also confirmed, however, that the concerns specified in the query have hindered the effectiveness of the current D&R process in some parts of the denomination. All too often D&R Committees have been impeded by excessive travel, difficulty in being perceived as being objective in conflict situations, being called upon too late, and becoming overextended in long-term conflicts. Many times people have been called upon as volunteers to work in conflicts that would have been extremely difficult for seasoned professionals.
4. **The Need for a Pro-active Approach to Conflict.** Congregations need to understand conflict, primarily through education and training, before it becomes a crisis. While the description of conflict in the 1977 “Discipleship and Reconciliation” paper was holistic, the way the paper was implemented often resulted in the narrowing of the definition to actual fighting. Thus Discipleship and Reconciliation Committees were not called until conflict had been allowed to escalate beyond the hope of effective intervention.
5. **The Need for a New Model.** It is clear that a new model is needed to help the Church of the Brethren live up to the biblical call to be communities of shalom in a changing world. It is also clear that the circumstances and needs of twenty-three different districts will vary. The Shalom Team model proposed in this paper is intended to be flexible enough to be used by each district, while at the same time focused enough to promote effective ways of working at conflict transformation in a variety of settings.

The call to accountability sounded by the 1977 “Discipleship and Reconciliation” paper is more urgent than ever. The Shalom Team model provides a way for the Church of the Brethren to recommit itself to actively seek God's shalom.

II. A CALL TO SHALOM

A. The Biblical Vision of Shalom

We live in a world in which conflict is abundant. Extreme forms of conflict, such as terrorism, confront us with the destructive power that conflict holds over us as individuals, congregations, and nations. We are also confronted with a different vision of the world found in Scripture. We look to this vision to find transformation for ourselves and for all creation.

This vision is found in the Hebrew word *shalom*. Shalom is a word rich with multiple meanings, including the concepts of peace with justice, wholeness, health, right relationships, reconciliation, and harmony with and for all creation; in short, total well-being. The word *shalom* is found over three hundred times in the Old Testament (Hebrew) scriptures.² Shalom shapes our relationship with others and seeks their well being (Jer. 29:71; Ps. 34:14). Shalom and salvation are virtually synonymous (Ps. 85:5ff; 119:165; Isa. 32). Shalom calls for justice, and God's children are to take an active hand in maintaining it (Isa. 32:16-17; Jer. 6:14; 8:11).

The New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ as the bringer and fulfillment of shalom. "I came," he says, "that [you] might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). God's people had anticipated that fulfillment of prophecy (Luke 1:52-53, 73-75; 2:28-32) and saw it realized in Jesus' life and teaching (Luke 4:18-19; Matt. 5:17-20). Through Christ's death and resurrection, lives are transformed: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). This new life is dependent on right relationships (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1-2; Eph. 4:11-16; Phil. 2:14-18) and faithful discipleship (2 Cor. 5:20-21). As followers of Jesus Christ, we are people of shalom.

B. A Theological Understanding of Conflict

Many of us have acquired the understanding that conflict is sin. This belief has led to the response that all conflict is bad and should be avoided. A frequent result of this understanding can be seen in the way many congregations deny the presence of tension, leading to brokenness, until conflict has escalated beyond a manageable level. Speed Leas, church conflict specialist, states, "The typically unspoken assumption is that if they were really good people, working in good institutions under divine guidance, conflict simply would not exist."³

Conflict does not depend on our "goodness" or "badness." Conflict simply exists in the church and in the world. Conflict has revealed itself to people of faith since the creation of the world as revealed in the Book of Genesis (Adam and Eve, Gen. 3; Cain and Abel, Gen. 4). The Apostle Paul, writing to the early church, acknowledges the importance of differences in the church, affirming the diversity of gifts as the work of the Holy Spirit, and likening them to the different but interdependent parts of the body (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4; Rom. 12). Such differences can lead to conflict, but Paul's concern is not whether there is conflict in the church, but how it is dealt with. (1 Cor. 6). Hoping and praying that conflict will "go away"

2. This section draws upon the biblical section found in Ronald Kraybill's *Repairing the Breach*. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981.

3. Isenhart, Myra W., and Michael Spangle. *Collaborative Approaches to Resolving Conflict*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc., 2000, 96.

has devastated relationships and congregations, denying one aspect of being human. The community of faith has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and has itself been called to a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5).

Conflict is not a choice, but how we use it is a choice. “Imagine how different our conflicts would be if we could move from an ‘Oh dear, how terrible’ to ‘What is God trying to say to us?’”⁴ Conflict may provide a vital spiritual function, calling us to release tensions and create options more in line with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Brokenness can be wasted or used as a wake-up call to strive toward total well-being or shalom.

C. The Need for Shalom in the Church

Shalom Team is more than a name. It is a call to a positive, forward-looking path of healing and wholeness. To be “People of Shalom” means to follow the biblical call to be in right relationship with and seek the total well-being of all God’s creation.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the “Discipleship and Reconciliation” paper we still need a rebirth of shalom in our congregations and in the wider church. We call ourselves a peace church yet continue to destroy each other in unbridled conflicts. The result is a state of brokenness that, while not the sole cause, is still a significant factor in the membership decline evident in our denomination today. What would be the effect on the steady loss of membership and the loss of actual and potential leadership in our church if we were truly committed to living out the biblical vision of shalom?

Congregations must be the foundation upon which the denomination builds, and a rebirth of shalom must begin there. Such a weight, however, is difficult for many congregations to bear. Few of our congregations and members who have experienced severe conflict will underestimate the toll on individual relationships and congregational life that conflict takes. Brokenness saps energy and spirit and results in the decline of effective ministry and membership. Even low levels of chronic conflict hinder the effectiveness of congregations and can play a role in their decline. Congregations in conflict simply cannot function in ways that provide the foundation for a healthy Church of the Brethren. We affirm the way of shalom as an option for congregations experiencing brokenness.

D. Shalom and the Transformation of Conflict

Mennonite peace consultant John Paul Lederach suggests that rather than trying to eliminate or control conflict, we learn to work with its “dialectic nature.”⁵ People involved in relationships create conflict. Just as destructive conflict affects those relationships, the constructive dealing with differences can also change the people, events, and relationships that created the initial conflict.

Conflict, when encouraged to escalate or left on its own, can become destructive. When aspects of conflict are transformed, the result can be improved relationships, group dynamics, and social structures. Those are the choices that lay before us as people of shalom.

4. Schrock-Shenk, Carolyn, and Lawrence Ressler, eds. *Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation*. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1999, 34.

5. This section draws upon the Conflict Transformation section found at www.colorado.edu/conflict/transform.

In today's climate of rapid and constant change, and in a time when fundamental models of mission and ministry are shifting, congregations find themselves facing life and death issues. A harsh reality, confirmed by experience, is that congregations locked into death spirals of chronic brokenness and conflict will not survive. Constructively dealing with conflicts is no longer optional; it is the key to survival.

It is the hope of this paper that establishing shalom—total well-being—as the goal of congregational life will change the way we think of conflict. Shalom Teams will be equipped to work with congregations before conflict deteriorates into destructive fighting and brokenness. The health of congregations is significantly enhanced and the threat of severe conflict greatly reduced when churches are provided with the support and resources needed to focus time and energy on a wide variety of issues affecting their corporate life and ministry.

III. THE SHALOM TEAM MODEL

A task team, to be known as the Shalom Team, will be appointed by the District Executive/Minister Committee or its equivalent and will be accountable and reportable to it. The Shalom Team will work in partnership with the District Executive/Minister. Its purpose will be to empower congregations, and districts, to maintain and enhance healthy relationships and to deal creatively with brokenness in its earliest stages.

The Shalom Team will work in partnership with the District Executive/Minister, and may be activated by a contact made through the District Executive/Minister or through a Shalom Team member.

A. Membership and Qualifications

The Shalom Team will be of a sufficient size to meet district needs, with attention given to gender balance and geographical representation within the district. People eligible for the Shalom Team must be active members of the Church of the Brethren. They will serve for a term to be determined by the district. The District Executive/Minister, the District Board chair, and the District Moderator may meet with the Shalom Team.

People eligible for the Shalom Team will meet the following qualifications.

1. Members will demonstrate the following personal qualities:
 - Spiritual and emotional maturity
 - The ability to manage their own anxiety and be a non-anxious presence with others in conflict
 - Respect for confidentiality
 - Sensitivity, honesty, and integrity in their dealings with others
 - Commitment to the beliefs, practices, and polity of the Church of the Brethren
 - Openness to and respect for diversity (cultural diversity, personality styles, power, etc.)
 - Willingness to receive training in areas related to restoring wholeness
2. Members will demonstrate competency or will receive training in one or more of the following areas:
 - Listening skills
 - Basic conflict-resolution skills
 - Systems theory

- Group facilitation
- Multicultural issues
- Organizational and congregational dynamics
- Knowledge of Church of the Brethren General Board resources and other Church of the Brethren agencies' resources

B. Functions

There are four functions of the Shalom Team: Consult, Assess, Educate, and Mentor.

1. **Consult.** The Shalom Team will be available to provide timely, short-term consultation on any issue that hinders, or threatens to hinder, progress toward total well-being. Consultation will involve active listening, prayer, and discernment.
2. **Assess.** Based on the consultation, Shalom Team members may identify the needs or name the brokenness. Assessment should include assisting people to envision “next steps” that help move them toward wholeness and help them identify resources that would enhance such progress. The Shalom Team will be aware of a wide range of resources and will assist individuals and congregations in identifying options appropriate to their needs. Such resources will probably include Church of the Brethren agencies and their staffs (including Ministry of Reconciliation, Practitioner’s Network, Association of Brethren Caregivers, Congregational Life Team members), but can also include other local, regional, or national agencies or consultants, or resources provided within the district.
3. **Educate.** The Shalom Team will provide on a regular basis local, sectional, or district-wide educational and training events using the above-mentioned congregational resources. Shalom Team members will demonstrate a willingness to receive education as well as facilitate educational events being brought to the district. Examples of education events can include, but should not be limited to, the following:
 - Preventive skills that congregations can learn before differences escalate into destructive conflict
 - Competency in conflict-transformation tools and skills (including those listed in the qualifications for Shalom Team members)
 - Collaborative tools for making difficult decisions
 - Responding in the early stages to challenges and issues currently facing congregations or districts
 - Trends and challenges in the wider church and their impact on the district
4. **Mentor.**
 - a. Shalom Teams may identify and mentor people in the denomination who demonstrate skill in one or more of the areas listed under Shalom Team qualifications.
 - b. Shalom Teams may invite individuals to acquire additional training (via district events and other opportunities) and encourage them to share their learning with Shalom Teams.

Shalom Teams may become aware of possible ethical violations at any stage of these four functions. Should this occur, an immediate referral to the Ethics

process will be made.⁶ Shalom Teams may be called in to focus on any conflict or brokenness resulting from an ethics process.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

Responsibility for implementation will be given to each District Board or its equivalent. Within a reasonable time, districts will ensure that a Shalom Team is appointed and sufficient training is conducted to ensure that team members have the competencies required for initial consultation with congregations.

A. Transition from D&R Committees to Shalom Teams

Districts that have D&R Committees that are doing constructive work are encouraged to maintain that function until the Shalom Teams are in place. D&R Committee members are eligible to serve on a Shalom Team during the transition.

B. Financial Commitment

In our present-day world, the expertise needed for assessment and conflict transformation will require professionals in addition to volunteers. Congregations that can find the money for a new furnace or emergency repairs to the church building need to understand that the spiritual and emotional health of the congregation deserves at least an equivalent investment of financial resources.

It is highly recommended that districts model financial commitment to shalom by including a line item in their budget for matching funds for congregations willing to invest in their own health. This would provide options that may not have been available for congregations who were hurting in the past.

V. CONCLUSION

An historic peace church like the Church of the Brethren serves a unique role in the world by lifting up the New Testament vision of “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42). As followers of Jesus Christ, for nearly three centuries we have taken seriously this calling to a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). What we now do with this ministry is up to us. As people of shalom, we recognize that conflict can be productive or destructive, depending on our choices. To be faithful to our call, we expand our understanding of “the things that make for peace.” We choose shalom.

Action of the 2002 Annual Conference: Gail Erisman Valeta and Jim Yaussy Albright presented the report. *The delegate body adopted the report by a two-thirds majority vote as required with a polity change.*

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6. Specifics of this process are found in the 1996 Annual Conference paper “Ethics in Ministry Relations.”

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