

A BWCOB story toward inclusivity and marriage equality

Background and story

The story begins...

Following a lengthy process to adopt our congregational [Vision Mission, and Values adopted in 2013](#), in February of 2014, a question was raised from the floor of the BWCOB Council (hereafter Council) and directed to the Executive Committee concerning the process and requirements for a congregation to join the [Supportive Community Network \(SCN\) of the Brethren Mennonite Council \(BMC\) for LGBT interests](#).

The Executive Committee communicated with BMC leadership, engaged in rich and helpful discussions, and shared updates with the BWCOB Board of Administration (hereafter BOA). A report of the findings was shared with the Council in February 2015.

Meanwhile as we were engaging this process question, same sex marriages were legalized in Virginia. Our pastoral leadership inquired of the Executive Committee for guidance and clarity as to how to respond to requests for same sex marriages. The Executive Committee, with the support of the BOA in their meeting on January 21, 2015 asked the Ministerial Services Commission (MSC) to consider the question of our pastors performing same sex marriages and to bring a recommendation back to the BOA. Council was notified of this action and request at the February 2015 meeting.

In February of 2015, following the Executive Committee report to Council regarding the process to join SCN a motion from the floor of council was made for BWCOB to join SCN. After considerable, peaceful and rich discussion, the motion was tabled. The expressed intention to table the motion was to allow time to receive the recommendation from the MSC regarding marriage policy. Also questions were raised about implications for pastoral leadership and the congregation should they officiate same-sex marriages, recognizing Shenandoah District and Denominational statements that are to the contrary. While marriage equality policy is not a requirement for membership in SCN, there was an expressed desire from some members for the BWCOB congregation to be “*all in*” in alignment with our congregational [Vision Mission, and Values](#).

In response to the request of the BOA and informed by the Council actions of February 2015, the MSC met and considered the question with pastoral staff present, and moved the following recommendation and process outline to the BOA on March 18, 2015. The motion was approved.

“The Ministerial Services Commission recommends to the Board of Administration that the congregation enter a process to authorize and support our pastoral leadership to perform any legal marriages. The process will include opportunities for congregational dialogue, input, and information.”

The Process Outline

The proposed process was intended to engage the congregation with information, education, and in loving dialogue and discussion rooted in the deep bonds of relationship and care that we hold and to consider what it means to live out a faithful witness to the love of Christ for the world as we embody that witness in our congregational identity as expressed through our mission, vision and values.

Newsletter Communication

The April 2015 Newsletter contained information that outlined the council request from February 2015 and process outline.

Ministerial Services & Executive Committee

Meet with Shenandoah District Executive Minister

Meet with a current pastor (outside the Shenandoah district) authorized and supported to officiate marriages including same-sex marriages.

Consultation with Church of the Brethren denominational staff & leadership

Review Annual Conference statements on:

Urging Forbearance (2008)

Human Sexuality (1983)

Congregations in conflict with Annual Conference statement (2004)

Obedience to God and Civil Disobedience (1969)

Pastoral Leadership

Provide a Pastoral Reflections component in worship on Sunday (April 12th)

Have conversation with Pastoral Leadership in congregations where pastoral leaders are authorized and supported to officiate legal weddings.

Congregational Listening Forums:

April 12: Congregational Forum 9:45 AM

April 12: Congregational Forum 4:00 PM

April 18: Congregational Forum 10:00 AM

April 22: Congregational Forum 7:00 PM

* Following the congregational forums feedback from those groups about congregational pulse and readiness for action will be taken. These “straw poll” opportunities will provide helpful feedback to the ministerial services commission.

** Those not able to participate in the forums but who wish to have their voices heard should feel free to be in contact with members of the Ministerial Services Commission or one of the pastoral staff.

Final Presentations:

- April 15: Ministerial Services will present a process report to the Board of Administration of the congregational forums held to date.
- May 3: Ministerial Services will present a report to Council.
The report will include the possibility of one of two options:
- A. Based on feedback received to date Council will consider a recommendation to proceed OR not to proceed with “*pastoral authorization and support...*” for adoption.
 - B. Based on feedback received to date Council will consider a recommendation for further processing by the congregation.

The Action of Council May 3, 2015 (as reported from the minutes of the meeting)

Ministerial Services Report and Recommendation: The marriage equality affirmation process was presented by the chair of the Ministerial Services Commission. The Chair outlined the background and the process. Everyone was given a yellow ballot with the recommendation printed on it. The motion was read as follows “*The Ministerial Services Commission recommends that the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren congregation authorize and support our pastoral leadership to officiate any legal marriage.*” Discussion followed. Questions were asked pertaining to who could vote (only church members), consequences in the District/Annual meeting (Fred addressed the question with comments as to how the Manchester CoB was affected.) and do we have a plan to nurture and dialogue together with those who are in dissent of the vote? Are there absentee ballots?(Our plan of organization does not allow this.) The vote must have a 2/3 majority of those present to be affirmed. We then voted on the recommendation as presented.

The tellers returned with the results of the vote on the marriage affirmation recommendation. The recommendation was affirmed with a 71.8% majority and a dissent of 28.2% with 136 people voting. Additionally, there was a motion to bring the aforementioned tabled motion from February 1, 2015 off the table. The Motion passed. Questions were asked about SCN. “*The Bridgewater Church of the Brethren seeks to join the Supportive Community Network of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Concerns.*” Vote was taken by a standing vote. From the floor was a call for division of the house. The vote by ballot was then taken. The vote on the motion to join SCN was 73.8% affirming and 26.2% dissenting with 107 people voting.

A Wedding

On May 14, 2015 BWCOB Associate Pastor Chris Zepp officiated a wedding in Maryland for a former associate member of the BWCOB congregation and past leader and participant in the BWCOB college ministry and her same-gender partner.

Next Steps

Following the Council Meeting a letter as informed by the 2004 Annual Conference Statement “Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions” was sent to Shenandoah District Leadership.

The District Leadership Team met and responded to BWCOB both by setting up a meeting between BWCOB congregational leaders and DLT designated leadership. In subsequent letters and from those discussions the DLT requested BWCOB rescind its action of May 2015. The Council met in August and the question was raised if the Council wished to reopen the matter, and the process for reconsidering was explained. There was no motion to reconsider. The May 3, 2015 Council action was not unanimous and the inaction of the August Council meeting reminded the congregation that while a majority approved, not all in the fellowship were in agreement with the decisions made.

The DLT made the decision to relocate the 2015 District Conference to a different venue outside of the BWCOB facility. The District Conference Moderator came to BWCOB and brought greetings and an invitation to attend District Conference in November of 2015.

Limited Face to Face meetings continued between DLT leadership and BWCOB leadership. Throughout those meetings BWCOB leadership affirmed the congregational desire to remain in relationship with the district and named that the decision of May 2015 was not unanimous and that the congregation continues to find it way among those who disagree, who have been silenced, and hurt by the process. A conversation was planned to take place between BWCOB and the DLT in early October. The congregation was informed and provided a timeline of events to that date from the congregational perspective. However, the meeting was cancelled due to an inability to agree on the format and conversational rules that would guide the conversation making it a safe environment for dialogue.

October 26, 2015

Pastors Carr and Zepp were asked to attend separate conversations with the District Ministerial Leadership Team to articulate their understanding of their relationship to the action of the BWCOB council action of May. They were each permitted one congregational advocate for their individual conversations.

District Conference 2015

District Conference was held in November 2015. Numerous speeches from the conference floor were offered in relationship to the controversy unfolding in the district. At the end of the day the delegates adopted a resolution proposed by the Crab Run/Damascus congregations be used as a working document to craft a framework of response to a congregation in disagreement with an Annual Conference decision

DLT Recommendations

On December 10, 2015 The DLT met and acted upon a recommendation from the District MLT to :

- a. *Place a letter in the ministerial file of the senior pastor Jeff Carr noting he was “exonerated with censure for poor judgement.”*
- b. *“Terminate with the possibility of reinstatement the ordination of BWCOB Associate Pastor Chris Zepp.”*

BWCOB & Pastoral Response

Following receipt of this news BWCOB leadership and the BOA after consulting with Annual Conference Officers contacted the DLT and requested a joint appeal of these actions.

DLT Appeal

The DLT granted an appeals hearing under the facilitation of District Conference Moderator and moderator elect, on February 18, 2016. In advance of the hearing BWCOB leadership and pastors developed a statement of justification and rationale for the grounds of appeal. This was shared with the DLT one week prior to the hearing. On February 18th both pastors and 5 representatives from the BWCOB leadership met with the DLT. The format shared that night provided opportunities for BWCOB and pastors to “share our story”, and respond to specific questions. Following the departure of BWCOB persons the DLT continued to meet and ultimately re-affirmed the DLT actions of December 10th.

BWCOB leadership and Pastors were notified by the DLT chair of this reaffirmation and specifically named their “inability to achieve an objective perspective.”

Standing Committee Appeal

Following receipts of the official action of the DLT hearing, BWCOB leadership once again contacted the Annual Conference Officers and actions were begun to initiate an appeal to the standing committee specific to the actions of the DLT. The BWCOB BOA adopted a motion to file a joint appeal with BWCOB and both pastors. The motion for appeal was accepted by the Annual Conference officers and the Appeals Committee of Standing Committee of Annual Conference was activated. A modified statement of justification and rationale for the grounds of appeal was delivered to the Annual Conference Officers to be distributed to the Appeal Committee.

The appeals committee has met and has scheduled a telephone conference with pastors and BWCOB leadership for May 5th. Following that call further clarity of process and expectation should be available. The appeal committee will also have a call with DLT leadership and an appeal hearing date of June 27, 2016 with Standing Committee has been set.