

Northern Ohio District

Withdrawal Policy

It is the desire of the Northern Ohio District that all congregations feeling conflicted about remaining in the Church of the Brethren ("CoB") be open to conversation and discernment. It is further desired that reconciliation and being in full fellowship will be the outcome of this process. In the event that reconciliation is not achieved, then it is the desire that the leaving group and the CoB may separate with grace and prayers for well-being for each other.

Denominational polity that informs this process is found in the document: *"Congregational Withdrawal Process - Church of the Brethren - based on polity and recommended best practices."*

In light of CoB polity, a congregation must engage the District Board or its representative(s) in conversation as a first step when considering withdrawing from the CoB. This policy is developed specifically for the Northern Ohio District and approved by District Board on 05/09/2020.

Stage 1 - Starting Process and Clarifying Congregational Issues

This stage is designed to provide a formal starting place for a congregation to communicate to the District its wish for withdrawal from the denomination.

- A. The church board (or equivalent governing body) notifies the District by letter of intent to begin the withdrawal process.
- B. Written explanation, signed by the Board Chair and Board Clerk, of disagreements that necessitate withdrawal is submitted to the District Office.
- C. District personnel shall meet with the leadership of the congregation to listen and understand the reasons for the proposed withdrawal and seek means of reconciliation.

Stage 2 - Explanation and First Vote

- A. An official congregational meeting will be called and conducted by a District representative(s) to review the process and share consequences of leaving, including but not limited to the assumption of all outstanding liabilities and the cemetery maintenance responsibilities (if applicable) and to respond to questions.
 1. A letter will be sent to all active members of the congregation by congregational leadership notifying everyone of date, time, and purpose of the special council meeting.
- B. When the District representative(s) has determined an adequate time for Stage 2.A. has elapsed, if a motion is made and properly supported to conduct a vote on withdrawal, the District representative(s) shall oversee a first vote on withdrawal.
- C. The congregation will provide a current membership list to the District representative(s) and the vote will be by paper ballot with signature and printed name of the person voting.
 1. Only active members of the congregation that are present can vote. Members listed as inactive by the congregation are not eligible to participate in the vote.
 - a. If and only if the church's current constitution/by-laws specifically provides for absentee voting absentee ballots will be permitted according to the defined process.
 2. The District representative(s) will then confirm each ballot as being cast by a member of the congregation and will count the votes and report the results to the congregational business meeting.

3. A vote to continue the withdrawal process will only be considered successful by a 2/3rd majority.
 - a. If the vote is successful, the congregation and the District representative(s) will call for a period of prayer of no less than three months to seek additional wisdom of the Spirit and discernment of the members. Additional information may be sought of the District representative(s).
 - b. If the first vote for withdrawal is less than a 2/3rd majority, the congregation and the District will engage in further discernment, calling in skilled persons to assist in this process, with the goal of reaching reconciliation. This discernment period will be a minimum of one year before another vote to withdraw will be considered.

Stage 3 - Discernment and Prayer

- A. Following a successful vote for withdrawal, the District will contact the congregation's members that voted not to withdraw and active members that were not present for the vote to determine how many members wish to remain CoB. The District will enter into conversation with the group who wishes to remain CoB to discern whether or not they desire and are able to remain in the present church facility.
 1. If and only if the church's current constitution/by-laws specifically provides for voting by absentee ballots, then calls do not need to be made to active members that were not present for the vote.
- B. If the group that wishes to remain CoB is deemed by the District viable to continue corporate worship as a fellowship or congregation at the present facility and deemed able to actively minister to the community of faith and to the neighborhood, all property and assets shall remain CoB.
- C. If the group that wishes to remain CoB is deemed not viable by the District to continue corporate worship at the present facility, the District shall work with the group to remain in the CoB moving forward: Examples may be:
 - finding another nearby CoB congregation to transfer membership.
 - finding a smaller facility to meet at corporately.
- D. The District will inform the leadership of the withdrawing group of the results of Stage 3, steps A-C.
- E. If the group that wishes to remain CoB is not a viable congregation, the District may, within its full discretion, offer the withdrawing group the property according to the terms listed below:
 1. The withdrawing congregation pays the District a sum of \$55* per member based on the total active membership of the congregation recorded at the time of the first vote to withdraw, multiplied by 5 years plus any additional cost incurred by the District during the withdrawal process.
 - a. These funds will be held by the District to support the remaining CoB members through a time of transition and help reduce the loss of future donations to the District.
 - b. No money will be distributed to an individual or group of individuals that are not part of a CoB fellowship or congregation.
 - c. Any and all historical artifacts in the congregation pertaining to the CoB will be considered to be property of the District.

**The \$55 was determined by using the Fair Share Contribution – district budget/total district membership – at the time the first congregation voted to withdraw in 2022.*

2. The withdrawing congregation must agree to maintain the cemetery (if applicable) and develop a plan of transition for any outstanding liabilities.
 3. The withdrawing group must agree to these terms in writing prior to the second and final vote to withdraw.
- F. During this stage, the District and congregation should continue in prayer, discernment and conversation as the process goes forward.

Stage 4 - Final Vote*

- A. Based on the District Board's approval of the final separation terms, a final vote to withdraw will be conducted by a District representative(s) at a specially called congregational business meeting.
- B. The vote will be by paper ballot with signature and printed name of the person voting.
- C. Only active members of the congregation that are present can vote. Members listed as inactive by the congregation are not eligible to participate in the vote.
 1. If and only if the church's current constitution/by-laws specifically provides for absentee voting absentee ballots will be permitted according to the defined process.
- D. The District representative(s) will then confirm each ballot as being cast by a member of the congregation and will count the votes with the assistance of two congregational representatives and report the results to the congregational business meeting.
- E. A vote to continue the withdrawal process will only be considered successful with an 80% majority. If an 80% majority vote to withdraw is not met, the congregation will not leave the denomination and the withdrawal process is complete. A new process cannot be initiated within one year. It is recommended the congregation and District engage in further discernment, calling in skilled persons to assist this process with the goal of reaching reconciliation.
- F. If the 80% majority vote is met the congregation will formally enter into Stage 5.

*Note: If a final vote to withdraw is taken outside of District oversight, or if the leadership of the withdrawing congregation does not recognize the authority of the District Board, then upon a successful vote to withdraw, the withdrawing congregation will immediately turn over the property and assets to the District Board. The District will attempt to contact the members of the congregation to assist any members who wish to retain their CoB membership. All assets will come under the trust of the District and be at the sole discretion of the District Board.

Stage 5 - Concluding Process

In this final stage, all legal procedures are completed, and withdrawal becomes official.

- A. After a sufficient vote to withdraw, there will be up to 90 days until settlement for the withdrawing congregation to prepare financially for settlement.
- B. At or before the settlement, the withdrawing congregation shall:
 1. Provide proof of assumption of all outstanding liabilities.
 2. Release the District from any such liabilities and an agreement assuring the proper maintenance of the cemetery (if applicable).

- C. During the transition time,
1. The building will remain in trusteeship of the District, but the withdrawing group will be allowed to use the facility for corporate worship so long as operating expenses are assumed and timely paid by the withdrawing congregation.
 2. Any costs, including legal fees, the District incurs during this time will be added to the settlement.
 3. The withdrawing congregation must show proof of insurance listing the District as beneficiary of any damages to the property or from liability for any accidents at the property.
 - a. Failure to provide the required insurance will prevent the facility from being used until the settlement.
 - b. The withdrawing congregation must approve in writing its financial responsibilities as outlined in Stage 3.E.1. and the current section. If the congregation refuses, then the property and assets will be immediately turned over to the District Board.
- D. A final worship service, organized by a joint worship planning team, shall be scheduled with District personnel to pray for God's blessing on all going forward.

Acknowledgements: Portions of this document have been taken from withdrawal policies prepared by Atlantic Northeast District, Shenandoah District and the CoB "*Congregational Withdrawal Process - Church of the Brethren - based on polity and recommended best practices.*"

Addendum to the Northern Ohio Withdrawal Policy

Approved by the District Board at the 11/14/2020 District Board Meeting

1. On the question of a member of a withdrawing congregation serving on the District Board, on other District committees, as a District Officer, or representing the District in any elected or appointed role:
 - If a member votes “yes” to withdrawal at the first congregational vote, then they shall immediately resign from any District position where they serve, whether elected or appointed.
 - If a member votes “no” (to remain COB), then they will have the option to remain in the District position currently serving, whether elected or appointed. A conversation will be had with the District Board Chair to discern whether that person feels called to continue serve.
 - If remaining on the Board, then the individual shall abstain from any decisions that would directly affect the withdrawing congregation.
2. On the question of members of a withdrawing congregation serving as district delegates:
 - Once a congregation has taken their final vote to withdraw, they will not have representation at District Conference.

Amendments

Approved by the District Board at the 09/17/2022 District Board Meeting

Stage 3.E.1. be amended to read:

1. The withdrawing congregation pays the District a sum of \$55* per member based on the total active membership of the congregation recorded at the time of the first vote to withdraw, multiplied by 5 years plus any additional cost incurred by the District during the withdrawal process.

(*The \$55 was determined by using the Fair Share Contribution – district budget/total district membership – at the time the first congregation voted to withdraw in 2022.)

Stage 4.E/F. The percentage required for the final vote to be considered successful was reduced from 90% to an 80% majority.

Approved by the District Executive Committee at the 10/11/2022 meeting

Stage 2.A.add 1.

1. A letter will be sent to all active members of the congregation by congregational leadership notifying everyone of date, time, and purpose of the special council meeting.

Stage 3.A. add 1.

1. If and only if the church’s current constitution/by-laws specifically provides for voting by absentee ballots, then calls do not need to be made to active members that were not present for the vote.