

Chapter 7*

Church Order

Preamble

¶7000 The vision of the Free Methodist Church begins with a call and commitment to be a healthy, biblical community of holy people (¶6010.B). We purpose to follow Paul's instruction to the Galatian Church, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6). James 3:17-18 informs us, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." Therefore we do our part to live in peace with everyone as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18).

Healthy Biblical Community

¶7100 As we learn together from the Word of God, encourage one another in faith and life, practice healthy accountabilities and serve together in the cause of Christ, we contribute to the health of each person and help keep them from falling away from love for God and others. These principles and practices will support and nurture healthy order in the church.

Order in the church is best realized when we "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21), honor our membership covenant and ordination vows and partner together in the mission of the church. The church has a responsibility to disciple each believer. This is done best in transformational communities (¶6060.6) which purpose to nurture every believer and witness to those who do not know God.

* This is the 2003 General Conference authorized re-write of Chapter 7.

Biblical Principles

- ¶7110 The Bible describes specific behaviors which guide us in creating and maintaining a healthy biblical community. These include:
- A. We urge all persons to live lives worthy of the calling we have received. We strive to be humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love. In all our actions we make the effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).
 - B. We urge all persons to maintain a prayerful and Christlike spirit at all times, earnestly seeking to discern, find and follow the mind of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2; Philippians 2:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7).
 - C. We urge all persons to exhibit meekness of heavenly wisdom, which is first pure; then peace-loving, courteous, willing to yield to reason, full of mercy, compassion and good fruits; wholehearted and straightforward, impartial, sincere and without hypocrisy (James 3:17).
 - D. We urge all persons in the restoration of a brother or sister to pray that all actions will produce the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11), to promote holiness of heart and life (Titus 2:11-14), to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3), to serve as a warning to the vulnerable and careless (1 Timothy 5:20) and rescue those who are in spiritual danger of perishing (2 Thessalonians 2:10).
 - E. We urge all persons to be submissive (Ephesians 5:21). This submission is to be mutual toward both those under authority and in authority (1 Thessalonians 5:11-13). Quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder are unworthy of healthy biblical people (2 Corinthians 12:20).
 - F. We urge all persons to avoid the adversarial patterns which characterize unredeemed societies (Matthew 5:23-25). We regard ourselves as Christ's ambassadors who strive for peace with one another as we share the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

- G. We urge all persons to speak the truth in love as we all grow into Christ's likeness. This mature unity in Christ will join us together in doing our part to create healthy community life (Ephesians 4:15-16).
- H. We do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is substantiated by witnesses and/or evidence (1 Timothy 5:19).
- I. When a person is caught in sin, it is our responsibility to restore them gently and with all humility, aware that we also can be tempted (Galatians 6:1-3).

Purpose and Goals

¶7120 If an accusation is shown to be true, all action by the church is designed to lead to repentance, forgiveness and return to fellowship with God and the church. The church assumes the responsibility to follow the patterns of Jesus by consistently exercising grace and truth to restore a sinning member to wholesome relationships as made possible through Christ. Where there are persons who are harmed by a sinning member, the church will offer ministry to them in the protection of a transformational community and through the loving care of a godly individual.

Responding to Disorder

¶7130 Overseers, Ministry Education and Guidance Boards (MEGB) and Membership Care Committees (MCC) shall not ignore sin in the church. When it is clear that a member's relationship with Christ or with another person is compromised or damaged by sin, appropriate action shall be taken to speak the truth in love and restore health in the church and in the person(s) involved.

- A. Matters requiring attention include such things as:
 - 1. When there is a pattern of behavior of speaking and acting out of selfish ambition (Philippians 2:3).
 - 2. When there is a breakdown of communication which causes divisions (2 Corinthians 12:20).
 - 3. When there is a lack of wisdom and/or competence that brings leadership effectiveness and/or call to ministry into question.
 - 4. When there are unhealthy personal habits which

- clearly contribute to a lack of fruitfulness in life and ministry.
5. When there are teachings contrary to our Articles of Religion and/or our Membership Covenant.
 6. When there is a pattern of a lack of submission to an overseer, elder or church body or when there is a pattern by an overseer, elder or church body toward a person under their care that reveals a lack of reverence to Christ (Ephesians 5:21).
 7. When there is accusation and evidence of a pattern of sin in the life of an elder/member.
 8. When there is accusation and evidence of a pattern of living in breach of the non-negotiable fundamentals of the Free Methodist Church (§6050) or the *Code of Ethics for Ministers of the Free Methodist Church*.
- B. Restoring Order: When there is a breach of order, the response of the church shall include one or more of the following:
1. Private Counsel: The first step in restoring order usually begins with private confidential counsel. The overseer shall address the problem and call the person to deal truthfully with the issue(s) and follow Jesus with his/her whole heart, including sincere repentance. See “Checklist For Processing Accusations of Breach of Church Order” in the *Review Board and Court of Appeals Procedure Manual*.
 2. MEGB/MCC Counsel: When a person is discovered in their sin by others, or in situations when private counsel has not been effective in stopping the sin, the MEGB/MCC or the overseer and representative(s) from the respective board shall address the problem and call the person to deal truthfully with the issue(s) and follow Jesus with his/her whole heart, including sincere repentance.
 3. Covenant of Restoration: If private counsel has been resisted or ineffective, or MEGB/MCC counsel has been required due to the discovery of sin in the elder’s/member’s life, the MEGB/MCC shall establish a “Covenant of Restoration” (see

Restoration Process — A Manual for Superintendents and Ministerial Education and Guidance Boards, see Superintendents and MEGB Manuals).

4. Suspension from Ministry/Membership: The MEGB/MCC may suspend a person from ministerial appointment and/or membership when they fail to complete the Covenant of Restoration.
5. Immediate Suspension from Ministry: When an overseer becomes aware of the following cases, he/she shall immediately suspend an elder/member until a MEGB/MCC can be convened:
 - a) When the elder/member is accused of sin by at least two witnesses or has confessed to sin that reveals a long-standing brokenness in his/her life and relationships of such seriousness that it dictates the necessity of a healing process for the church, all persons involved and their families.
 - b) When an elder/member is teaching doctrine that is contrary to our Articles of Religion.

Processing Complaints, Accusations and/or Admission of Sin

¶7140 Overseers, MEGBs and MCCs shall process all complaints, accusations and/or admissions of sin that are not resolved by private counsel, by following both the *Review Board and Court of Appeals Procedure Manual* and *Restoration Process — A Manual for Superintendents and Ministerial Education and Guidance Boards*. Every time an elder’s membership is suspended there shall be a review by a Regional Review Board.

Review Boards

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- A. CONFERENCE MEMBERS (elders and deacons). At each General Conference, a four-person Regional Review Board shall be elected from each bishop’s area. Candidates shall be nominated by the nominating committee of the General Conference. Each Regional Review Board shall be comprised of two lay persons and two clergy, at least one of whom shall be a superintendent and shall include at least

one male and one female. Upon a MEGB's action to suspend or expel an elder, the Regional Review Board from the same Bishop's area shall:

1. Examine the MEGB minutes and review the overseers/MEGB log of notes and time lines in accordance with the "Checklist for Processing Accusations of Breach of Church Order" found in the *Review Board and Court of Appeals Procedure Manual* (pp. 5-6).
2. Request from the accused elder the completion of the accountability questionnaires referenced in the *Restoration Process — A Manual for Superintendents and Ministerial Education and Guidance Boards*, page 13, ¶B.2.C.
3. Prepare a report to the conference MEGB including any recommendations.
4. If, in the opinion of the Regional Review Board or the accused elder, injustice has occurred, the Regional Review Board shall convene a meeting of the MEGB and the accused elder. The accused elder shall have the right to be accompanied by another member of the FMC and/or his/her spouse.

The Regional Review Board shall listen to both parties, raise any questions, and, in the absence of both parties, deliberate and make a decision. Either party may submit any information, even if new, which lends itself to a discovery of truth. The action of the Regional Review Board may be appealed by right (¶228, ¶7200).

- B. LOCAL MEMBERS. The annual conference MEGB shall be the Conference Review Board. Whenever a local church MCC takes action to suspend or expel a member from ministry and/or membership, the Conference Review Board shall:
1. Examine the MCC minutes in accordance with the "Checklist for Processing Accusations of Breach of Church Order" found in the *Review Board and Court of Appeals Procedure Manual* (pp. 5-6).
 2. Request from the accused member the comple-

tion of the accountability questionnaires referenced in the *Restoration Process — A Manual for Superintendents and Ministerial Education and Guidance Boards*, page 13, ¶B.2.C.

3. Prepare a report to the local MCC including any recommendations.
4. If, in the opinion of the Conference Review Board or the accused member, injustice has occurred, the Conference Review Board shall meet with the MCC and the accused member. The accused member shall have the right to be accompanied by a member of the FMC and/or his/her spouse.

The Conference Review Board shall listen to both parties, raise any questions, and, in the absence of both parties, deliberate and make a decision. Either party may submit any information, even if new, which lends itself to a discovery of truth. The action of the Conference Review Board may be appealed by right (¶228, ¶7200).

Confidentiality

¶7160 The confidential care of personal information is a necessary aspect of spiritual care and congregational life. The responsibility to treat personal information confidentially extends not only to elders, but also to all persons working within the organizational and institutional life of the church. The need for confidentiality exists in two general areas: spiritual care and personnel matters.

Confidentiality in Spiritual Care

¶7170 In providing spiritual care, our elders and members maintain a relationship of trust and confidentiality, holding in confidence all information revealed to them whether it is formally or informally shared. If a person gives express consent to reveal confidential information, our elders and members may, but are not required to, reveal this information.

- A. Elders have a responsibility to keep confessional confidences inviolate, breaking this confidentiality only if the risk of imminent bodily harm to any person is present. The exception to this confessional confiden-

tiality includes any confession of sexual abuse of a child or any other conduct required to be reported under federal/state law.

- B. The confession of one elder to another is an inviolate confidence, unless the conduct is both ongoing and unrepentant. This conduct by any elder who continues to take advantage of any person under his/her care is an abuse of position. The confession is not confidential, but a request to be helped to stop this abuse and removed from the temptations and responsibilities of his/her position until repentance and healing occurs.

Confidentiality in Personnel Matters

¶7180 Respecting the privacy of church personnel requires confidentiality in personnel matters. This confidentiality extends not only to the discussions required in the interviewing, approving, appointing, supervising, disciplining and dismissing of personnel, but also to all records pertaining to these matters (except pursuant to ¶7190).

- A. The requirement that all financial records be public includes all salary and compensation figures of paid personnel.
- B. The appeal of a personnel decision by a committee or board assigned with this responsibility is not confidential. The decision to appeal a decision requires the information on which the decisions were made to be made public at the appeal. All such appeals are held in open session.

Communication

¶7190 Paul wrote to Timothy, stating, “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Timothy 5:20). He is speaking here of those who continue to sin even after the church has done what it is able to do to warn and restore the offender. However, if repentance is demonstrated by a change of behavior, communication to the whole church is to be avoided. While each case must be carefully examined, these instructions are to be followed:

- A. If a suspended or expelled elder attempts to seek employment in another conference or denomination,

the superintendent and/or bishop shall accept responsibility to make known to appropriate persons in a conference or, if asked, another denomination, the status and reasons surrounding the suspension or expulsion of the elder.

- B. If an elder is suspended or expelled, after review the Regional Review Board shall send a written communication to each superintendent and bishop in the FMCNA noting the action taken and the reason for the action.
- C. The presiding bishop of the annual conference or his/her designee shall read to the conference during the reading of Special Appointments a letter from the Regional Review Board pertaining to the Regional Review Board hearing and decision.
- D. The *Yearbook* of the FMCNA shall list the name of the offender in one of these ways, appropriate to the case:
 - Under Review
 - Suspended
 - Covenant of Restoration
 - Withdrawn Under Complaint
 - Expelled

Processing Appeals

¶7200 The Court of Appeals shall process appeals pursuant to the *Review Board and Court of Appeals Procedure Manual*. A Court of Appeals member is disqualified if he/she has any involvement in the matter or is in a position of conflict of interest.

- A. An elder whose suspension or expulsion has been affirmed by the Regional Review Board or a local church member whose suspension or expulsion has been affirmed by the Conference Review Board has a right to appeal to the Court of Appeals (see ¶4320.M.1, ¶7150.A.4, ¶7150.B.4).
 - 1. Notice of intent to appeal and the grounds for an appeal must be provided in writing to the secretary of the Board of Administration within 30 days of the Regional Review Board's decision for an elder or the Conference Review Board for a

- local church member.
2. No less than 30 days before the hearing of the appeal, the elder or member must provide in writing to the secretary of the Board of Administration a statement of the reasons why the decision of the Review Board (Regional/Conference) should not be affirmed. The statement shall contain all relevant information that is pertinent to the grounds of the appeal and shall not exceed ten pages, double-spaced.
 3. No less than 14 days before the hearing of the appeal, the designee of the MEGB/MCC may file with the secretary of the Board of Administration a statement in rebuttal of the elder or member's statement.
 4. No less than 7 days before the hearing of the appeal, the elder or member may file with the secretary of the Board of Administration a reply to the MEGB/MCC's rebuttal. The reply by the elder or member is confined to issues raised in the MEGB/MCC's rebuttal and shall not restate content from the original statement.
- B. The Court of Appeals shall review all documents from the Regional Review Board/Conference Review Board, listen to both parties, raise any questions and, in the absence of both parties, deliberate and issue a decision.
1. If the decision of the Regional Review/Conference Review Board is affirmed, the decision of the Court of Appeals is final.
 2. If the decision of the Regional Review Board/Conference Review Board is not affirmed, a new review will occur with the Court of Appeals serving as the Review Board.
 3. The action of the Court of Appeals serving as a Review Board shall be final.