

Nuts and Bolts – A History of the Executive Committee  
The Bible Fellowship Church Historical Society  
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Churches are complicated. A denomination is even more so since it is a collection of individual churches, each of which is complicated. The Bible Fellowship Church did not intend to be complicated, just efficient. When it began, it was the connection of a few men near Zionsville, Pennsylvania. They just wanted to do what God taught, proclaim the gospel to those who needed to trust Christ and be saved.

In 1859, several men had become disenchanted with the Mennonite Church of which they were a part. They believed they should be more aggressive in sharing the gospel. That was their desire but it was not shared by their church. The need for organization was not on their radar. At their second meeting they recorded, “In the second session, held on May 28, 1860, in the Meeting House in Upper Milford Township, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, nothing of importance was decided.” (Verhandlungen, page 25)

They began to think they needed something to guide them as an organization. The November, 1865, Conference brought this statement: “A committee was appointed to lay down general rules and a brief statement of faith of our denomination, based on God’s Word and the teaching of Menno Simons, and to report at the next conference for further discussion.” (Verhandlungen, page 44). They offered no explanation for why at this point they needed these statements. In the following year, they reviewed the work. “The Confession of Faith, which includes the rules and discipline for the guidance of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference and which was composed by the committee that was appointed for it by the last Conference, was read by Joseph L. Romig.” (June 1866, page 45) The meeting determined that what had been prepared should be published, 800 in German and 400 in English. In 1867, printed copies were available. The doctrinal statement was the first published statement by any North American Mennonite group.

The next thirty years were characterized by the growth of the denomination, the formation of other conferences and the increase in the number of churches. The three main conferences were Pennsylvania, Indiana and Canada. These conferences settled into holding meetings every four years calling these meetings the General Conference. The individual conferences met annually and were identified as an Annual Conference. The basic organization and structure saw no significant changes during these years. Business between conferences was carried out by committees. The tasks and functions that were needed were assigned to individual committees each of which reported to the conference it served. The conference meetings were mainly taken with committee reports and enacting committee recommendations.

The denomination took its final shape and identity in 1883 when all the conferences finalized their union and identified themselves as The Mennonite Brethren in Christ. The General Conference met every four years to conduct their business. The Annual Conferences met in their individual areas each year. The organizational structure was based upon committees which conducted their business and reported to the conference who appointed them.

Because our information comes from the formal meetings, we do not know about the informal discussions that took place between meetings. We cannot tell if the committee structure was appreciated or the source of frustration. We would have to have sat in on meal time conversations or overheard the discussions while they were waiting for a meeting to begin. We do not know when someone suggested that a committee was needed to pull all the organization together. All we have are the statements that recorded their action. Often, we learn what they did but not why. So, it is with the formation of an executive committee.

The minutes of the 1896 General Conference record the following: "W. B. Musselman, M. Bowman and A. Good were elected a committee to formulate an article with

reference to an executive committee.” No “where-ases” are given so no explanation as to why a committee was desired. (1896, Wednesday, forenoon session)

The duties of the committee were listed and approved.

1. The Executive Committee shall consist of one Presiding Elder, three travelling Elders, and three lay members; the Presiding Elder shall be chairman of the committee. These shall be elected by ballot from among the General Conference members at each General Conference, for a General Conference term.

Vacancies of the above committee, if such occur for any reason, may be filled by the remaining members of the committee from among the members of the last General Conference.

2. In case there be no Editor for any reason, the Executive Committee shall meet and elect an Editor, who shall serve until the next General Conference.

3. The Executive Committee shall examine the Editor in case any charges are preferred against him, and if he be found guilty, and he does not meet the requirements of the committee, they shall have power to suspend him from his office until the next General Conference, where he shall be dealt with.

4. The Executive Committee shall constitute a court of appeal, which shall, if necessary, hold a session once a year, for the purpose of trying all appeals that may be taken by any travelling preachers for the decision of an Annual Conference. The chairman shall preside at the trial of appeal cases. Five members of the committee shall constitute a quorum.

5. The Executive Committee shall meet whenever the chairman or any three members of the committee shall deem it necessary, and a majority of the members elected shall constitute a quorum for transacting business.

6. It shall have charge of the publishing interests, subject to the regulations adopted by the General Conference from time to time.

7. It shall settle all disputes on boundaries between Annual Conferences.

What was apparently thought to be the need of the Executive Committee is to be deduced from the duties. Supervision of the editor indicates a desire to have control of the denominational publication, The Gospel Banner. The Committee would serve as a means of challenging the decisions of the conference. The Committee would settle disputes about boundaries or the decisions of the local church about pastoral assignments and perhaps the start of new churches.

The envisioned responsibilities of the Committee show in further assignments made by the Conference:

In case any associate Editor advocates or Annual Conference endorses any doctrines, rules or regulations that are unsound or not in harmony with our Discipline through the columns of the Gospel Banner, the Editor shall not be held responsible, but such an associate Editor or Annual Conference shall be denied their special rights by order of the chairman and the majority of the executive committee.

Any member or preacher who in any way undermines the Editor may be reported by the Editor or anyone else to the Chairman of the executive committee, who, with or through one or more of said committee will investigate the matter and if such an one is found guilty of the same, without rendering satisfaction will be dealt with according to the Discipline. (1896, Thursday forenoon session).

The Pennsylvania Conference did not establish an Executive Board for another five years until 1901. This indicates that what the committee would do was not an urgent matter to them. The formation of the committee for the Pennsylvania Conference was noted but that was the only mention of it that year. The minutes of the Pennsylvania Annual Conference for 1902 recorded, "The Executive Committee reported some progress made during the year. Resolved, That we continue the Executive. Committee." (Minutes, Saturday morning, October 18, 1902)

For the next several years, the existence of the Executive Board was noted but no action or decisions were reported. In 1906, the minutes noted, "The President of the Executive Board reported. Not much can be reported as the work assigned to us is still unfinished." 1907 recorded "The Executive Board wishes to state that they have nothing to report at this time."

In 1907, it was clear that more complex issues were appearing. A committee had been appointed to secure incorporation but nothing had come of it because the Executive Committee had not taken action.

1908 brought a need for legal representation. The dispute of the Quakertown Church had required the denomination to be in court. The Executive Board seemed to come together at this point for action.

Resolved, That we elect an Executive Board, consisting of five unconditional men to be elected annually, who shall have power to act as trustees with authority to purchase, hold, sell otherwise dispose of personal property and real estate in behalf of the Annual Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ of Pennsylvania.

Resolved, That the above Executive Board shall be the party of the second part in the matter of the transfer of the Church property on Third street, Quakertown, Pa.

Resolved, That the Executive Board be authorized to secure the funds necessary to purchase the above property including expenses and give acceptable security.

Resolved, That the Committee appointed last year to secure an "Act of Incorporation," be discontinued and that this work be assigned to the Executive Board, which Board shall have full power and authority to secure an "Act of Incorporation," examine and correct deeds, titles, charters, etc., and dispose of all other legal matters that may present themselves from time to time.

WHEREAS, We are not sufficiently informed at this time relative to the election of a General Board of Trustees to fulfil the duties and functions decided upon by the Annual Conference, therefore

Resolved, That the Executive Board elected at this Conference shall be hereby duly authorized and empowered to formulate or elect a Board according to the requirements of the law in case the election of the present Executive Board is illegal. (1908, Friday morning)

The Executive Board was finally empowered to make decisions and take action. It would be difficult to know how the denomination would have handled these circumstances without a committee who could take action. Without the Executive Board, the Annual Conference would have needed to do what needed to be done and that would have been unworkable.

Whereas until this point, most ministry, activity and decisions happened in the local church, ministries were beginning that were led by the denomination or the churches in union. That required a way for decisions and leadership that would reflect the will of the churches in combination. The first need was how to have real estate ownership that was not limited to a particular church. The 1909 Annual Conference approved the following:

Resolved, That the President of the Gospel Herald Society shall purchase no lot or property for church purposes without first consulting the Executive Board and securing its consent.

Resolved, That the Executive Board be authorized to purchase land or property for Camp Meeting purposes. (1909, Thursday evening)

The Gospel Herald Society was not connected to one church but was an arm of the Annual Conference. Camp Meetings had been held in various locations. Now, the Annual Conference determined to bring them together in one location. One alternative would have been to call special meetings of the Conference each time a proposal

needed to be considered or approved. That was clearly unworkable. The decision and its components could be given to the Executive Board to make a proposal. This seems common sense to us today but they had not worked that way. While it does not seem radical, it was a new thing at that point. From that point on, real estate transactions were run through the Executive Board.

Over the next several years, the role of the Executive Board became more prominent. In 1910, it was the first report in the Yearbook. The number of meetings was growing: 10 in 1911, 11 in 1912, 9 in 1913. More of the decisions of the Annual Conference were being made by the Executive Board. It was the better alternative than calling a meeting for each decision which would have been unrealistic or waiting until the following year for a decision.

In 1913, the officers of the Executive Board were listed. H. B. Musselman was chairman. C. H. Brunner was secretary. W. G. Gehman was treasurer. These men would constitute the leadership of the board and the denomination from this time until the 1940s. Their service in these offices is an indication of the importance the Executive Board had gained.

In 1914, the Executive Board assumed another legal role which indicated the need to keep up with the demands of the churches. The following was approved:

Q.—How shall the titles of the Church property be secured and deeded?

A. —To a board of trustees or Executive Board, according to the laws of the State and their successors in office, in trust, as the property of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. (Doctrines and Discipline – 1914)

The denomination now had a legal connection to the particular church and in some way the local church could be held accountable to the conference.

The denomination was adding ministries which involved purchase of properties which needed the oversight and approval of the Executive Board which had been empowered to transact these purchases. Mizpah Grove was purchased. The Home facility was procured. The Executive Board approved and finalized these purchases.

In 1924, the Executive Board was asked to investigate further legal status by seeking incorporation. They reported back in 1925:

We have considered the matter of the Laymen's Benevolent Society and the incorporation of the Annual Conference but have come to no definite conclusion and ask to be privileged to further consider these matters.  
(Monday morning, October 19, 1925)

The Executive Board was overseeing the Laymen's Benevolent Society. In our early days, life insurance was not permitted. You did not need life insurance if you were trusting that God would provide. The Laymen's Benevolent Society was a way to have death benefits but it was not called life insurance. The Executive Board took the responsibility for the funds and benefit payments.

During decades 1920 – 1950, the Executive Board was dealing with routine legal matters. They had become the decision makers in these matters. That they took care of these issues meant the Annual Conference did not have to spend time on them which was perhaps more efficient. The committee reported annually what they were deciding or approving.

During these years, the Board continued the routine decision-making for the denominational ministries. They considered a new hymnal. They oversaw the ministry at Mizpah Grove and determined not to hold camp meetings during the war years.

In 1941, they were asked to consider educational issues.



The Board of Examiners requests the Annual Conference to ask the Executive Board to formulate a plan whereby due credit may be given for work done in approved Bible Schools, Colleges, and Theological Seminaries by such as may desire to enter our active work. (Saturday afternoon, October 18, 1941)

Their report in 1943 recorded their decision.

The Executive Board recommends that such as have attended Bible Schools, Colleges or Seminaries approved by the Executive Board who desire to become ministers of the Conference, such shall present to the Board a schedule and report of the work done in such institutes of learning. The Board of Examiners shall examine each case individually and recommend to the Executive Board what studies, if any, of the Reading Course shall be taken and the Executive Board shall finally determine the matter. (1943 Yearbook, page 43)

This marks a significant turning point since formal education had been frowned upon. The conviction was that advanced education had a corrupting influence. So, higher education was not encouraged. That did not mean that they were encouraging ignorance. For years, men were prepared for ministry through an "in house" learning program. A three year program of reading and testing was required which had to be completed. Now, the attitude was changed and the formal programs of learning were recognized and valued.

1943 brought another significant decision. The Laymen's Benevolent Society which had served as substitute life insurance was losing its significance. Apparently, the attitude toward life insurance was changing. People were getting insurance which had higher benefits than the society. The decision was made to shut down the society. The Executive Committee was entrusted with the task of figuring out what to do with the funds. Their report for 1943 gave their proposal:

RESOLVED, That we authorize the Executive Board to unite with the Officers of the Laymen's Benevolent Society to work out a plan whereby the amount of money invested in church property shall become a workable Church Extension Fund. (Friday afternoon, October 15, 1943)

This is another of the decisions for which there is more than meets the eye. Church planting had never been a stated agenda for the denomination. The agenda was evangelism. The formation of churches was almost an afterthought. From the beginning, meetings were held and people were saved. Often a group would be formed of the new believers in a community. It was almost a given that they would meet together. Churches were not the goal but rather the salvation of the people in the community. Now, something called church extension was in the workings. Formation of churches was now becoming part of the agenda for the denomination.

1947 brought the final division from the larger denomination. The Pennsylvania Conference could not support a merger which would have formed the Missionary Church. Theological issues were at the heart of this decision. Pennsylvania would not go along with the decision to adopt the Wesleyan Arminianism of the union. They committed to become a separate entity called The Mennonite Brethren in Christ Pennsylvania Conference.

The 1947 Conference passed this resolution:

Be it and it is hereby resolved that the Annual Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church of Pennsylvania now being in session, does hereby instruct its officers to make application for a Charter, and that said application be in the form and of the character as appears upon Articles of Incorporation submitted to this Conference prior to the introduction of this Resolution...

(Friday evening, October 17, 1947)

The Executive Board was to formulate regulations that would fit with the new incorporation. “Resolved, That the Executive Board be permitted to revise the standing rules and make them conform to the regulations in accord with the Incorporation of the Church.” (Monday afternoon, October 20, 1947)

The Executive Board became the Board of Directors in 1948. No explanation is given for the change but apparently the new corporation was to be under a Board of Directors rather than an Executive Board. There is no indication that the responsibilities were significantly different. The denominational ministries continued to lead the individual ministries while the new Board of Directors continued the responsibility for the legal matters and administration that needed attention.

The changes to an independent denomination continued to come. The Board of Directors was given the task of considering a change in our name and revising our government structures, both local and denominational, in 1952. This was a major task and would require an investment of time and effort. Any proposal to change a name is bound to be controversial. In 1953, a committee was appointed to revise our government but their proposals were to be approved by the Board of Directors indicating that they had a significant say in the process. The work of revision would continue for the next couple years but proposals were to be approved for Conference consideration through the Board of Directors. The need for centralized leadership was growing. In 1957, the Board of Directors was given more authority as they were appointed an agenda committee for approval of petitions to Annual Conference.

The name “Bible Fellowship Church” was approved in 1958. The responsibility for making the various legal adjustments fell to the Board of Directors.

More change was being evaluated and delegated to the Board of Directors. The 1959 conference approved the following:

Resolved, That we request the Board of Directors to study the areas and responsibilities of the various Conference Boards and that they seek to

formulate a master plan that would better utilize our resources and to make plans to care for the future needs of the work as a whole. (Saturday afternoon, April 11, 1959)

For the next few years, the Board of Directors continued to do the routine work of the “nuts and bolts” of the denomination by overseeing the legal and administrative decisions of the denomination. While major doctrinal changes were occurring through the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, there was little adjustment to the administrative and legal structures.

In 1976, the Board of Directors formulated by-laws which were adopted by the Annual Conference. The new by-laws were organized by numbered sections which made reference to them easier. Much of the re-organized by-laws incorporated previous duties which had not changed. However, some new responsibilities were brought under the umbrella of the oversight of the Board. The Ministers’ Retirement Fund was now under its direction.

New thinking was creeping into the works of the Annual Conference. A strategic planning committee was proposed. “Resolved, that the Chairman appoint a strategic planning group that shall consist of seven members of the Bible Fellowship Church.” (1991 Yearbook, page 37). They met and determined what their work would be. Its purpose was to “make recommendations to the Annual Conference regarding a strategic plan for the overall direction of the Bible Fellowship Church.” (1992 Yearbook, page 186). No one had ever raised the issue of “overall direction.” We were to evangelize. By-laws and procedures had constituted our leadership ideas through our history. We did the “nuts and bolts” of ministry and did the work we were called to do. But change in the form of expansion was coming. New questions were being asked. New communities with different cultures were becoming a part. What exactly were we doing?

The Strategic Planning Committee was formed to answer these questions and form strategic plans for our future ministry. We were no longer just a bunch of individual congregations but an organized denomination which could work together with combined efforts. The Strategic Planning Committee would offer direction and purpose for the denomination and its various ministries. A new sense of unified purpose began to appear. In 2006, the committee included this in its report:

For at least ten years, pastors and denominational leaders have expressed the need for more definitive leadership for the BFC, particularly between Annual Conferences. We recognize that the denomination has strong legislative and judicial structures, but believe that executive leadership has been lacking. A plan will be presented at Annual Conference to address this need. We believe that executive leadership is necessary for future development of the BFC and are fully in favor of moving forward in this way. (2006 Yearbook, page 183)

The need for change was being promoted in more concrete steps in 2007.

Whereas, the Board of Directors favors changes in the administrative structure of the Bible Fellowship Church, and  
Whereas, the Board of Directors sees both potential and the need for further refinement in the proposal of the Strategic Planning Committee, therefore be it Resolved, that the Annual Conference approve creation of a Steering Committee as described... (2007 Yearbook, page 87)

The next step was taken the following year.

Resolved, that the Strategic Planning Committee as described in Article 512-17 of the Faith and Order of the Bible Fellowship Church be dissolved, and further

Resolved, that the responsibilities for strategic planning now be cared for by the Executive Board and Executive Director of the BFC... (Yearbook 2008, page 175)

The changes that were being proposed were an attempt to centralize leadership and provide a way to produce shared denominational vision and direction. The denominational ministries, which were called agencies, were now identified as departments. Each agency each had its own agenda. Now, the departments would report to the Executive Board and be accountable to the denomination through them. Now, the disparate parts of our denominational ministry would be joined together. This meant more than mere administrative responsibilities. Now, there was the potential to create a denominational vision and work together to accomplish that vision. A statement had been drawn up by the Strategic Planning Committee but little had come from it. "The Bible Fellowship Church seeks to be a fellowship of churches united to make disciples of Jesus Christ."

The Executive Board continued its effort to create shared outlook and vision in 2011 as it presented value statements, theoretically identifying those things we shared.

1. We value the Bible
2. We value worship of God/Fellowship with God
3. We value fellowship with God's people
4. We value the Church
5. We value the Church's mission. (2011 Yearbook, pages 98-99)

The effort to create a united denominational ministry took shape in 2013 when a plan called the 20/20 Vision was adopted at the Annual Conference. The 20/20 Vision was comprised of 16 "vision points" to be accomplished by the year 2020. These goals were overwhelmingly adopted by a vote of 136 to 26 (2013 Yearbook, pages 13-14). The plan called for a review of these points in 2020. This was a new step

which added vision casting to the work of administration for the Executive Committee.

When 2020 arrived, the 20/20 Vision was not discussed or mentioned. The conference that year was abbreviated by the covid pandemic. The next few years showed that the Executive Board had returned its focus on administration. No mention is made in the following years of the 20/20 Vision. The reports of the committee focus on the activity of the various departments. The goals of the vision did not come with a plan or road map for how to accomplish the goals, how the churches would work together to carry out the vision. As a result, only a couple of the goals were actually brought to fruition.

The promise of a new direction for the Executive Board and for our denomination soon receded. For most of its existence, whether as an Executive Board or as a Board of Directors, administration was the focus. Yearly reports were the main product. Our churches were not drawn together in a focused ministry shared by all. Our churches identified themselves as autonomous. Each church had its own ministry. We shared a common doctrinal commitment but not a shared goal of ministry.

The 2024 Yearbook has the following statement on the cover, “ReCasting Our Vision.” What is contained in the yearbook is more nuts and bolts. Legislation and administrative reports are the bulk of material presented. The goals of 20/20 are not mentioned. What is described is another year without denominational direction.

What is needed will be hard to achieve. How can churches which promote autonomy in the particular church come to share a common denominational vision? If we are to grow and make an impact on our world such a shared vision is necessary. Without it, our vision just exists as individual initiatives.

Will the legacy of the Bible Fellowship Church be legislation and administration? Will our churches be a fellowship united to make disciples of Jesus Christ or just autonomous churches each of which has its own vision? We need measurable goals and a plan to work to meet those goals. We will need more than legislation and administration.