



Association of
Brethren Caregivers

A NEW WORLD COMING ... A RENEWED CHURCH EMERGING

A key component of the vision of the Association of Brethren Caregivers — to seek and secure the well-being of all people — causes the ABC Board to address growing concerns over the way in which Brethren are currently organized for ministry and mission. Out of love and care for our denomination, and in pursuance of Christ’s prayerful petition “that they may all be one,” the ABC Board is committed to working earnestly and collaboratively to address the inadequacies of our current structure, as well as its inability to account for widely differing expectations within our denomination. On the eve of our 300th anniversary as Brethren, and in anticipation of discussions soon to be held concerning Brethren ecclesiology, we offer a pro-active call for transformational change which will define the Church of the Brethren as it transitions into being the church for the present age. We see a new world coming; a world crying out for all that we have to offer as Brethren. We prayerfully challenge our beloved denomination to intentionally organize and position itself for ministry and mission in the future.

Presented in two parts, this document first describes *the denomination as seen through the eyes of the Association of Brethren Caregivers*, and second, *describes ABC as we see ourselves today*.

A Proposal from the Association of Brethren Caregivers of Vision and Transformation in the Church of the Brethren

AFFIRMATIONS

The Church of the Brethren’s unique Anabaptist-Pietist heritage establishes us as God’s peculiar and particular offering to the world. The blessings we have to offer to the world are considerable, particularly when our various ministry components are yoked together in a shared witness and a collaborative ministry.

The Church of the Brethren was instrumental in the founding of the National Council of Churches, Church World Service, Heifer International and other far-reaching ministries.¹ Our peace witness has remained an integral part of who we are over almost three centuries. Our influence has far exceeded our size in the ecumenical community. Our denomination’s skeptical posture toward secular systems, inherent hopefulness for the redemption of all creation, abhorrence of violence, commitment to radical discipleship in obedience to Jesus Christ and steadfast obligation to caregiving are all marks of its faithfulness to its original calling. Our unique Anabaptist-Pietist heritage commits us to radical discipleship, making us an important expression of God’s church in the world. To undermine the denomination’s effectiveness through duplication of administrative energies and competition for resources is to fail to live out God’s call for our denomination.

¹ Ken Kreider, *A Cup of Cold Water*, p. 84, 94-98.

OBSERVATIONS

As participants in denominational and agency life following the redesign of 1997, the ABC Board has been in a position to experience the consequences of this new structure. It is our opinion that the present structure has fallen short of the markers of an effective organization. We envision a cohesive, streamlined structure which:

- promotes cooperation and unity within the church;
- empowers ministries at all levels (local, district, area and national);
- facilitates collaboration and shared ministry;
- reduces anxiety and the resulting competition for available resources;
- models good stewardship of human and fiscal resources; and
- “builds up the body” and strengthens our collective witness to our constituents and the world around us.

Ideally, structural transformation emerges naturally when organizations have determined the following:

- a shared vision which points to a destination/goal/outcome;
- an examination of the “terrain” which must be traversed; and
- a determination of what “vehicle” is required to cross that terrain.

Structure is that vehicle. Choosing transportation without a clear destination and roadmap is unhealthy and untenable. Reorganization for re-organization’s sake is counter to the work of the Spirit. A new vision for Brethren ministry is required in the new world that is emerging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ABC Board therefore calls for a radical re-envisioning of the Church of the Brethren. We envision a simplified, Christ-called and Spirit-led structure. We therefore recommend that a committee elected by the Annual Conference examine denominational polity through a process which includes consideration of at least the following factors:

- assessment of the overall health and effectiveness of congregational, denominational, district, area, agency and ecumenical ministries;
- identification of any ineffective, redundant or overlapping programs;
- envisioning structures that are inter-affective and representative of the diverse needs of our denomination;
- development of minimalist structure consisting of only that which serves our identified ministries; and
- utilization of Brethren rather than outside consultants. Informed by our heritage and guided by our faith, Brethren better understand how Brethren best function.

Recognizing that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” we look with anticipation and excitement to the day when Church of the Brethren agencies and institutions work as one to broaden and deepen our impact upon the broken world around us.

The ABC Board stands ready to commit human and fiscal resources toward the process of denominational self-examination, a process to which we, as caregivers, are deeply committed, and a process which we, as individual members of the Church of the Brethren, see as essential to our future as a body of Christ. Until the denomination begins an in-depth and thorough self examination, the Association of Brethren Caregivers will continue to foster the caring ministries of the Church of the Brethren.

Association of Brethren Caregivers – Fostering Caring Ministries for Today

For the staff and board of directors, the Association of Brethren Caregivers will continue to build a healthy organization that fosters the caring ministries and to model healthy relationships within the denomination. For the past few years, the major goal has been to build an agency structure that reflects independence and stability in the newly formed structure created by redesign of the General Board (1997). Although ABC has grown in financial support and in visibility, it continues to struggle with fuzzy boundaries and unclear roles between agencies. At the same time, ABC has initiated collaboration between Annual Conference agencies. In the future, the Association of Brethren Caregivers will continue to maintain self-definition within the current denominational structure, take responsibility for managing its own anxiety, and stay emotionally connected to congregations, districts, Annual Conference and agencies of the Church of the Brethren.

In order to maintain self-definition, the Association of Brethren Caregivers will create high quality communications that raise awareness of the ministries of ABC and the importance of financial support for the organization. The ABC Board and staff will:

- promote ABC's identity through a variety of communications (Newsline, multi-media Annual Conference presentation, identity brochure, district conference displays, *Caregiving*, etc.) which highlight the caring ministries of ABC;
- provide training for deacons, pastors, chaplains and other caregivers through conferences and workshops throughout the denomination;
- develop a long-term funding strategy that will undergird ABC's ministries; and
- provide innovative and creative ABC-branded products for Church of the Brethren members and beyond.

Throughout the denomination, organizational anxiety is high. The denomination is faced with declining membership, diverse theological positions, major readjustments within long-term denominational programs, and complex relations among the agencies. While the Association of Brethren Caregivers cannot solve the problems of the denomination and the state of the church in American culture, ABC can take responsibility for addressing its own organizational anxiety while modeling a non-anxious presence within the denomination. Drawing peace from God's presence and trusting in God's abiding love we will embrace health and promote wellness. The board and staff of the Association of Brethren Caregivers will:

- provide a healthy work environment and personnel policies that promote the wellness of and enhance the relationships between staff members;
- promote continuing education for all staff that encourages personal and professional growth;
- promote semi-annual staff development and team-building; and
- raise awareness about the benefits of wellness, both personally and corporately.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Association of Brethren Caregivers to the larger denomination is to model emotional connectedness. Through a variety of activities and with an humble spirit, the Association of Brethren Caregivers seeks to collaborate at all levels. ABC retains a commitment to seek the greater good and provide quality programming for members of the church. The board and staff of the Association of Brethren Caregivers will:

- promote collaboration between agencies at the executive level (Interagency Forum; Together: Conversations on being Church; etc.) and within program areas (Welcome Home Project; Long-Term Funding Strategy; Wellness Ministry; etc.);
- engage districts and congregations in raising awareness about ABC's ministries and provide resources for local and district ministries;

- commit to creative brainstorming about the well-being of the denomination; and
- address conflict when it arises with honesty, gentleness and expediency.

The Association of Brethren Caregivers seeks to continue Jesus' mission of love and healing today. Our ministries are an enduring sign of our belief that every person is a treasure, every life a sacred gift, every human being a unity of body, mind and spirit. We work to bring alive the Gospel vision of justice and peace. We answer God's call to foster healing, act with compassion and promote wellness for all persons and communities, with special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved and most vulnerable. The Association of Brethren Caregivers, as a healthy, self-defined agency, will continue to work collaboratively within the current structure of the Church of the Brethren.

Written and submitted by ABC Study Committee. Committee members included: Connie Burk Davis (Committee chair), Wally Landes (Chair-elect of the ABC Board), Eddie Edmonds (ABC Treasurer), Marty Barlow (former General Board member) and Sandy Bosserman (District Executive of Missouri/Arkansas). Edited and approved by the ABC Board, September 24, 2005.

*The Association of Brethren Caregivers serves the caring ministries of the Church of the Brethren.
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