Review and Evaluation mandate is adopted, study on vitality begins

Moderator David Steele presided as the Annual Conference set in motion a Review and Evaluation Committee to assess denominational organization, structure, and functions, among other business.

The Review and Evaluation Committee will carry out its study and make recommendations in 2017. The Conference appoints such a committee in the fifth year of each decade to assess a wide-ranging list including agency collaboration, church members’ interest in denominational program, and more.

A new study of vitality called for by the Standing Committee of district delegates received support from the Conference, and responded to “Query: Future District Structure.” Hours of discussion in Standing Committee revealed varying points of view about the need to evaluate district structure, and a desire to address concerns about church vitality. Named to the committee were Larry Dentler, S. Pennsylvania District; Shayne Petty, S. Ohio District; Sonya Griffith, W. Plains District; Craig Smith, Atlantic N.E. District; assoc. general secretary Mary Jo Flory-Steuery.

Resolution on Christian Minority Communities brought by the Mission and Ministry Board was adopted. It focuses on areas where Christians are targeted as religious minorities, and steps for Brethren to take in response.

Business deferred from 2014 was approved:
“Amendments to the Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren” clarifies term of service for a board member chosen chair-elect, expectations for unexpired terms, and recognizes Pacific Northwest and Puerto Rico Districts.
“Interpretation of Polity Regarding Agency Financial Reports” allows agencies to make financial reports in electronic form.
“Polity Change Proposal from Brethren Benefit Trust” allows a BBT board incumbent eligible for a second term to automatically be on the ballot, with approval from the BBT board.
“Amendments to the BBT Articles of Organization” includes minor changes as well as significant changes that solidify an understanding of BBT as an independent organization in relationship to Annual Conference.

In other business delegates made a 1 percent cost of living increase in the recommended minimum salary table for pastors.
Delegates receive report on crisis response in Nigeria

The crisis of Ekklesiayar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria), which has been facing the assault of violent extremists in Boko Haram, was the subject of a detailed report to the delegates. Presenters included Jay Wittmeyer, executive director of Global Mission and Service, who outlined the five-year Nigeria Crisis Response, and EYN president Samuel Dali, who expressed thanks for the support of the American church.

He said to the American Brethren: “You came and strengthened our hope to live. You came and wiped our eyes to see a clearer and better future.... We believe the future of the church will be better than before.”

Delegates also prayed surrounded by a “Wall of Healing”—17 banners each about 6 feet tall, bearing the names of more than 10,000 Nigerian Brethren who have died in the violence. The names and information on the banners were collected by Rebecca Dali and staff of her nonprofit, CCEPI.

Conference celebrates the general secretary’s service

Stanley J. Noffsinger’s leadership as general secretary since 2003 was celebrated by the Conference with reflections from speakers, a video review of his term in the office, and gifts, followed by a reception.

Speaking about Noffsinger’s service and accomplishments were a number of Brethren leaders, along with ecumenical guests including Christian Churches Together director Carlos Malave, Aren Jebejian of the Armenian Orthodox Church in America, and Sharon Watkins, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) general minister and president.

“There is nothing greater than being in and among the body of Christ,” Noffsinger responded, in part. “I hope we make a decision to be a unified body of Christ in this particular community known as the Church of the Brethren. We have an important voice, small that we may be—a voice that is sought after.... I pray for this church to flourish.”