

UB 1. Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century

Origin of the Committee

The 2012 New Business item “Church of the Brethren Ecumenical Witness” from the Committee on Interchurch Relations Study Committee gave two recommendations: (1) to discontinue the Committee on Interchurch Relations and (2) to have the Church of the Brethren Mission and Ministry Board and Leadership Team appoint a committee “to write a ‘Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century’ that builds on our history and calls us into the future of the church of Christ as part of a community of communions” [see the 2012 Annual Conference Minutes for the full report of that study committee].

Action of the 2012 Annual Conference: Annual Conference accepted the recommendation of Standing Committee that the Committee on Interchurch Relations be discontinued and that the church’s ecumenical witness be expressed by the staff and the church at large. Annual Conference further approved Standing Committee’s recommendation that the Mission and Ministry Board and the Leadership Team appoint a committee to write a “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” that builds upon our history and calls us into the future of the church of Christ as part of a community of communions. Upon completion, this vision will be brought to Annual Conference for adoption. (Passed by a 2/3rds vote.)

2013 Update from Mission and Ministry Board and Leadership Team

A committee to write a “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” has been appointed. They are:

Larry Ulrich, Illinois/Wisconsin District
Tim Speicher, Atlantic Northeast District
David Shumate, Virginia District
Jenn Hosler, Mid-Atlantic District
Wanda Haynes, Oregon/Washington District
Liz Bidgood-Enders, Atlantic Northeast District

This vision paper will be brought back to Annual Conference delegates upon completion.

Respectfully submitted,
Stanley J. Noffsinger
General Secretary

Action of the 2013 Annual Conference: Annual Conference received a report that Larry Ulrich, Tim Speicher, David Shumate, Jenn Hosler, Wanda Haynes, and Liz Bidgood-Enders have been appointed to write a “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” vision paper, which is to be brought back to Annual Conference delegates upon completion.

2014 Report of the Study Committee appointed to write A Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century

Upon appointment by the Church of the Brethren Mission and Ministry Board and the Leadership Team, the study committee on “A Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” began its assignment with a conference call to become acquainted. This was followed by a two-day meeting at the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Md., with two members participating via video conferencing. These meetings, highlighted by Bible study and reflection, enabled the committee to clarify the scope of its assignment, define its focus, determine the kinds of research necessary, and begin to carry out specific tasks related to that research.

Plans include conducting a survey to garner the reflections and experiences of the church globally, nationally, regionally, and locally. Two Annual Conference insight sessions will allow the committee to hear participants’ thoughts on relationships with other Christians and with people of other faiths.

The study committee examined the assignment with two objectives: to look at the history of the Church of the Brethren and celebrate the strides made possible in relationship with others of shared values and concern; and to examine the various ways members, congregations, and the denomination might engage with the larger community of communions in cooperative efforts toward “God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done.”

The committee plans a second meeting and intends to present a statement at the 2015 Annual Conference.

Committee members were deeply saddened by the death of the Rev. Dr. Larry Ulrich in December 2013. His passion for ecumenism and interfaith relations has proven invaluable to the committee and will continue to inform its work, as well as the ongoing ecumenical activity and witness of the Church of the Brethren.

Wanda Haynes
Jennifer Hosler
David Shumate
Larry Ulrich (deceased)
Elizabeth Bidgood Enders, recorder
Timothy Speicher, convener
Nancy Miner, staff support
Stan Noffsinger, general secretary

Action of the 2014 Annual Conference: Annual Conference received a report that the committee appointed to write a “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” will bring the paper to Annual Conference upon completion.

No report was presented in 2015 because the instruction given was that the paper would be brought to Annual Conference upon completion.

2016 Interim Report – Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century

“The Church of the Brethren, though small in numbers, has had a large influence in the ecumenical community.” This statement characterizes much of our denomination’s cooperative relationship and partnerships, which have occurred over many years, numerous issues, and varied concerns. Disaster response, volunteer service, peace witness, and conflict resolution are notable arenas of ecumenical and interfaith cooperation where the Church of the Brethren has – and continues to offer – a distinctive, important voice and presence.

Following two working retreats of discussion and study, plus ongoing conference calls and email correspondence, the study committee on “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” continues the process of drafting a statement for Annual Conference and the church at large, which:

- acknowledges and celebrates our rich experience of partnerships and cooperative relationships;
- embraces our understanding of scripture that calls us to live out the example of Jesus by loving our neighbor, peacemaking, and caring for needs of others through individual efforts and partnerships with other faithful bodies;
- challenges us to continue to seek opportunities where common concerns lead us to work together to address the technological and social opportunities and realities of this century; and
- encourages the cooperative efforts of individuals, congregations, and districts – as well as the denomination – to engage locally, nationally and globally in dialogue and actions that empower God’s people to serve in a world that needs compassion and Christ-like love.

The members of the committee welcome your input on specific recommendations and examples of ecumenical and interfaith cooperation by August 31, 2016, as we prepare a final document for presentation to Annual Conference.

Tim Speicher, convener
Elizabeth Bidgood Enders, recorder
Wanda Haynes
Jennifer Hosler
David Shumate
Nancy Miner, staff support
Stan Noffsinger, general secretary

Action of the 2016 Annual Conference: The report was presented by the study committee’s convener Tim Speicher, accompanied by committee member David Shumate. The written and oral interim reports of the Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century study committee were received as information for the delegates.

2017 Report of the Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century Study Committee

The following paper is presented for adoption by the delegate body.

[Secretary's note: See the 2017 Minutes for the version of the committee's paper that was printed in the Conference booklet for the 2017 Conference. That Conference did not have time to take up this item of business. Because the paper that the committee is bringing to the 2018 Conference is basically the same, the 2017 version is not being reproduced in this Conference booklet.]

Action of the 2017 Annual Conference: Annual Conference adopted a motion to refer this item of business to the officers for the agenda of the 2018 Annual Conference.

2018 Report of the Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century Study Committee

As a result of the hearings held at the 2017 Annual Conference, the committee had opportunity to add some clarifications to the document it had presented to the 2017 delegate body:

- A sentence was added to the overview and a paragraph was added to the historical background section to identify previous Annual Conference decisions that support interfaith engagement.
- Further information is provided about scriptural foundations and about the importance of interfaith dialogue in carrying out our scriptural calling to peacemaking.
- The recommendations section now begins with a comment about how fitting it was for the committee to present this paper in 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, as those anniversary celebrations call us to consider how we will look at Jesus' call for unity among believers.
- A further addition to the recommendations section emphasizes more firmly the importance of being honest and explicit about who we are as Christians in the Church of the Brethren while learning about who others are.
- And a new recommendation to the denomination is added to what was presented in 2017: that we "partner with interfaith bodies to address human need, equality, poverty, homelessness, refugees, and to protect religious minorities ... without compromising Christian and specifically Brethren values."

The following paper is presented for adoption by the 2018 delegate body.

Tim Speicher, convener
Elizabeth Bidgood Enders, recorder
Wanda Haynes
Jennifer Hosler
David Shumate
Nancy Miner, staff support
David A. Steele, general secretary

A Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century

INTRODUCTION

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6, NRSV).

The Church of the Brethren, along with the other groups in the Brethren movement, traces its beginning to baptisms in the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany. The Eder connects to a series of other rivers (the Fulda and Weser), and the water eventually flows into the North Sea, before joining the Atlantic Ocean. Just as the Eder River is connected to other bodies of water, the Church of the Brethren is part of the worldwide body of Christ. As we hold fast to our identity and calling in Christ, the Spirit of God calls us into partnership with brothers and sisters who have also received living water. The Greek word *oikoumene*, which means the “whole inhabited earth,” is a reminder that we are connected by faith in ways that are far greater than our differences. It is from this word that we get the term “ecumenical.” Our ecumenical interests and activities connect us to one another and to God as tributaries and rivers connect to the ocean.

Ecumenism is the movement toward Christian cooperation and unity. The diversity of ecumenical bodies bears witness to many streams or branches of Christian faith that are trying to be true to the gospel as they interpret it from scripture. However, as councils of churches and other ecumenical partnerships proclaim, there is a common prayer and desire to be one in spirit. Though churches may not agree on everything, demonstrating unity, compassion, and Christ-like love are marks of true discipleship. This paper seeks to set forth a vision for how the Church of the Brethren will relate to and work with other Christian bodies. Additionally, recognizing that we live in a polarized multi-religious world, this paper aims to provide a framework for understanding, loving, and relating to our neighbors of other religions.

An overview

Continuing the work of Jesus is the calling of all people. In significant ways, the Church of the Brethren has found that cooperation with other faith communities in areas of service has greatly multiplied effective outreach. One observation is that “the Church of the Brethren, though small in numbers, has had a large influence in the ecumenical community” (“Church of the Brethren Ecumenical Witness,” 2012). The greater faith community has been guided by our peace witness and service programs.

While we celebrate ecumenical relationships between professing Christian denominations or communions, interfaith engagement (that is, between Christians and non-Christian faith traditions) opens streams of conversation and service for the wider world. Some fear that interfaith engagement might lead to a syncretistic faith, where beliefs and practices from unlike faiths are combined. The greater danger, however, is that lack of conversation and understanding between persons and institutions of unlike faith might lead to prejudice and persecution of particular faith communities and their members. Support for interfaith engagement is found in previous Annual Conference statements and resolutions, most recently in the 2015 Annual Conference Resolution on Christian Minority Communities.

In scripture, Jesus, our example, was willing to relate beyond the boundaries of his own faith as demonstrated by his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-44). He counsels restraint when some of his disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume inhospitable Samaritans (Luke 9:51-55). These examples demonstrate that 21st century followers of Jesus should also be willing to cross religious boundaries to show compassion, and to practice restraint and transforming love when encountering hostility.

The Church of the Brethren was born following the Protestant and Radical Reformations, during a time of fighting and persecution between different Christian religions. Advances in communication and transportation have resulted in an interaction of various religions and cultures that once were isolated from each other by geography and language. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, beyond September 11, 2001, and into the 21st century, religious extremism and competing religious identities, along with other political and societal factors, have led to terrorism, conflict, polarization, “othering,” and hostility across religious lines. Whether during the age of the Crusades, or the era when Brethren were persecuted prior to emigrating to North America, or today’s modern Islamic extremism by groups like Boko Haram or ISIS, violent religious extremism around the world terrorizes ordinary communities and peaceful religious persons. The resulting fear, mistrust, hatred, and prejudice can lead to further violence. The acts of an isolated but violent few taint the image of the majority of worshipers who desire peaceful coexistence.

In both the United States and Nigeria, we see evidence of the need for trust-building and cooperation in communities that have been targeted by terrorism. Just as Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) is tasked with living out Christ’s love to their Muslim neighbors, so too do we Brethren in the US need to take up Christ’s call to love our neighbors and our enemies, whatever religion they may hold. The Church of the Brethren is known globally as one of the three historic peace churches, together with the Mennonite and Quaker traditions. Voices within and outside our denomination have urged Brethren to continue our witness today as a *living* peace church, transforming and reconciling relationships in our world.

Differences in practice and doctrine will continue to exist between people of faith. As a living peace church, it is crucial that we witness to a faith in Christ—a faith that seeks to understand and to be understood by persons of other faiths. Loving our neighbors and understanding our neighbors go hand in hand. Therefore, it is vitally important that we enter into dialogue with other religious traditions as opportunity occurs. While this does not ensure peaceful coexistence, it provides the basic foundation for tolerance in the broader society.

As God is the creator of all life, our attempts to serve God and care for our neighbor’s good are surely blessed by God. In its broadest sense, ecumenical and interfaith partnerships promote understanding and cooperation in meeting the needs of God’s people and caring for God’s creation.

The recommendations offered in this paper provide a way for the Church of the Brethren, at all levels, to honor and represent our history and tradition while working beside and learning from other perspectives. These recommendations strengthen our witness as a body of Christ and affirm that all people are children of God. In a country and world where technology brings us together and ideology has the potential to drive us apart, we hold fast to the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

The process leading to this paper

The Committee on Interchurch Relations (CIR) was formed in 1968 to explore connections and further conversations with other Brethren denominations and the American Baptist Churches USA. CIR was responsible for creating the document “A Vision of Unity for the Church of the Brethren in the 1980s,” which gave direction for ecumenical engagement in the following decades. However, in its fall 2010 meeting, members of CIR recommended that Standing Committee and the Mission and Ministry Board discern a vision for Church of the Brethren engagement in ecumenical work for the 21st century. That recommendation led to formation of this study committee, tasked with writing “A Vision for Ecumenism in the 21st Century.” The work of CIR members and a history of Brethren ecumenical involvement in the US and around the world have shaped this study committee’s awareness of the unique voice the Church of the Brethren brings to the wider Christian body. This rich history and unique witness have shaped our recommendations about how to partner in mission and dialogue with people of faith in this time.

Our work has included meetings, phone calls, writing, Annual Conference insight sessions, and a survey on relationships with other Christians and other faiths. A listening insight session allowed us to hear from Brethren across the US discuss joys and challenges in engaging with other Christians and faiths. Another insight session highlighted the experiences of Brethren in the US and Nigeria, sharing their stories of cooperation and efforts to build understanding. As the Boko Haram insurgency took place during our work, the witness, struggle, and testimony of our sisters and brothers in Nigeria shaped our writing and recommendations. Whether in the US or Nigeria or other places around the world, the task of overcoming hatred, fear, and suspicion to love our neighbors is weighty and difficult—but not impossible, with God’s help (Luke 1:37; Ephesians 3:20).

In our survey to a sample of Brethren (see Appendix B), we asked about relationships with other Christians, looking at what joys, benefits, and challenges existed for individuals, their churches, and the denomination. We also inquired about relationships with other faiths and sought to learn what particular joys, benefits, and challenges existed at the individual, congregational, and denominational levels. We wanted to know what people were doing—what brought them joy, what benefits they thought were gained from that work, and what struggles they faced.

The survey respondents were not representative of all ages or ethnicities within the Church of the Brethren and it had a higher proportion of men. Further research is needed to understand how young people and people of color in the Church of the Brethren perceive and are involved with other Christians and other faiths. Survey participants chose whether or not to respond to the email, limiting our findings to people who saw it relevant or meaningful to answer the survey.

From this survey, we can see that a noteworthy proportion of Brethren are building interpersonal and congregational relationships, worshiping with, and cooperating with other Christians. These interactions bring joy and benefits by providing a better understanding of the full and diverse body of Christ. Cooperation expands what churches are able to accomplish and empowers them to address community needs alongside their sisters and brothers in Christ from other denominations.

For survey respondents, ecumenical work with other Christians at the denominational level was not as well-known as what happens at the congregational level. Yet many acknowledged that such work increases the Brethren voice and witness to the church and the broader world, expands what we are able to accomplish as a church, and allows our church to see and experience the broader, fuller body of Christ.

Engagement with other faiths is much less common than engaging with other Christians. Significant numbers of respondents did not report or know of involvement as individuals, as part of their congregation, or as part of the broader Church of the Brethren denomination. Learning more about self and others, meeting a diverse array of people, and dispelling stereotypes were all cited as benefits from engagement with other faiths. Interfaith engagement at the denominational level was also not as well-known as engagement at other levels.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS

Ecumenism is not a term found in the Bible. However, a call for unity is present throughout scripture. Psalm 133:1 names “how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Unity is not the same as uniformity. While uniformity enforces sameness in appearance, attitude, and practice, unity comes from the same purpose of Spirit. Regardless of the scope and breadth of ecumenism, it requires unity.

In Isaiah 2:2-4, the prophet envisions people of all nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord’s house. God will arbitrate for many peoples, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation. In a Jewish context, other nations and other peoples represented those outside the faith of Israel. Even so, the prophet envisioned a peaceable world where all would find their common good in the presence of God.

Scripture calls for God’s shalom, a peace that is more than the absence of violence—it is also the presence of wholeness, wellbeing, and right relationships. The prophet Amos proclaims justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). Streams of faith flow together seeking the source of all life and trying to uphold life for all people.

The Gospels represent diverse understandings of what it means to faithfully follow Jesus. The disciples demonstrated in their bold actions the struggles and joys of following Jesus. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus prays that his disciples would be one, “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:21; for a larger context, see John 17:20-26).

When Jesus’ disciples saw someone casting out demons in the name of Christ, they wanted to stop him because he was not with them. Jesus’ response to them was, “Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (Mark 9:41).

In the book of Acts, Paul’s letters, and other New Testament writings, there are descriptions about the character of forming Christian communities. Each body represented different concerns and challenges, and each community offered unique perspectives. While letters addressed certain

beliefs or practices that strayed from the gospel of Christ, churches lived out their calling in broad expressions of faith.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he calls for unity in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:1-6). Believers are called together through "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6). The chapter continues with a reminder that each is given unique gifts for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ. Just as individuals form parts of worshiping communities, there are many traditions—from Pietist to Pentecostal, from Catholic to Calvinist, from Anabaptist to Anglican and beyond—and each offer something to our understanding of the fullness of Christ.

As followers of Jesus in the tradition of the Church of the Brethren, a historic and living peace church, our community takes seriously the New Testament calling of peacemaking. Interfaith engagement—building trust, learning about and serving our neighbors—is a core part of peacemaking in a world divided along religious lines. The call to love neighbors extends from the Hebrew Scriptures: "You shall not take vengeance . . . but you shall love your neighbor as yourself," and "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18, 34). Jesus taught that the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" is one of the "greatest commandments," together with the call to love God with heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:34-40). While loving and worshiping God, Christians are to also love and care for neighbors—without qualifiers about who those neighbors are, where they come from, or what they believe.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that peacemaking is a core tenet of faith: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Peacemakers are children of God; God's children are to be peacemakers. Further in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches the disciples that revenge and enemy hatred are not to define their discipleship. Love, prayer, and kindness for enemies: these are the ethics of Jesus (Matthew 5:43-48). To use Jesus' illustration, just as the Father in heaven sends rain and sunshine on "on the righteous and the unrighteous," so too are children of the Father to extend kindness and love to fellow humans outside of Christianity (Matthew 5:45). The call for Christians to seek understanding, harmony, and reconciliation can also be found in New Testament letters (Romans 12:9-21; James 3:17-18).

Jesus related to those who did not share the same religious background, culture or beliefs. In addition to his encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:1-42) and healing a Samaritan among lepers (Luke 17:11-19), Jesus used a Samaritan as the model example in his parable about the greatest commandments (Luke 10:25-37). A Jewish man was beaten by robbers and people of his own religion would not assist him. Though Samaritans and Jews held different beliefs, and despite cultural norms indicating that the two groups should not mix, a Samaritan man goes out of his way to care for, tend, and finance the beaten man in his recovery. Although a Samaritan was the least likely hero in the story, Jesus challenged a scholar in religious law by naming a religious outsider as the one who was a true neighbor. Instead of holding up doctrine, Jesus exhorts the scholar, his listeners, and the church to "Go, and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Loving one's neighbor involves caring for the needs of all people, regardless of their religious beliefs.

All of these scriptures guide and challenge the work of relating to strangers, neighbors, and friends. As we respond in faith, we find a consistent call to seek understanding, to serve together, and to work for justice while joyfully living the good news. Engaging ecumenically with other Christians involves fellowship with sisters and brothers in Christ. While these family ties were difficult to enact throughout many periods of history, it is much easier today to cross denominations and communions in Christian fellowship. In a spiritual sense, as Christians, other followers of Christ are our sisters and brothers. Ecumenical engagement with other Christians demonstrates unity, love, and cooperation within the family of Christ. In terms of interfaith engagement, for building relationships with non-Christian religious persons and groups (Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, secular humanists, atheists, and others), its biblical basis comes from the church's peace witness and broader call for shalom.

Some may fear that engagement could involve syncretism or relativism. However, a religious pluralism approach—which calls for peaceful coexistence and understanding, *not* a religious combining—fits within the biblical call for peacemaking. Pluralism allows us to understand others while maintaining our specific belief in Jesus as reconciler and redeemer, while keeping the New Testament as our creed. Specifying the purpose of various interactions (building understanding, doing interfaith community service, or evangelism) can allow us to build trust, maintain our witness, and extend love and understanding in a world rife with hatred and division.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sharing a cup of cold water with our neighbors in the name of Christ is part of a long tradition in the Church of the Brethren. To affirm where we stand now, it is important to understand where we have been. The earliest known Brethren involvement in dialogue with other denominational groupings was participation in the first three of the Pennsylvania synods called by Count von Zinzendorf and Henry Antes in 1742. These meetings marked Zinzendorf's efforts to bring together all of the German-speaking confessional groups in Pennsylvania, as well as Pietist separatists in the colony. While this short-lived effort to unify the German-speaking churches in Pennsylvania failed, it did inspire the Brethren to meet together on an annual basis (Durnbaugh, 1983, p. 1007).

As tensions developed within the Brethren movement, leading to a three-way split in 1881–1883, the Church of the Brethren (then known as the German Baptist Brethren Church) began to soften its resistance to some of the forms of American Protestantism. Among these were an emphasis on education, including Sunday schools on a local level, publishing on a denominational level, and the development of institutions of higher education, as well as increasing involvement in home and foreign missions. All of these inevitably led to small, but increasingly detailed levels of ecumenical involvement, such as participation in the International Sunday School Convention beginning in 1908 (Kennedy, 1983, p. 659).

As members of the Church of the Brethren entered into foreign missionary work, they also engaged in ecumenical activity. Brethren missionaries negotiated their mission locations with other missionary and church bodies. In Nigeria, the Church of the Brethren shared work with the Brethren Church and the Basel Mission (now known as Mission 21). International,

interdenominational missionary conferences in Edinburgh, Scotland (1910), and Tokyo, Japan (1920), influenced Brethren mission work.

The first half of the 20th century also saw a quickening pace of Brethren involvement with other denominations in cooperative ministry, particularly in the area of social concern. Perhaps the turning point in the attitude of cooperation with other Christians, as well as secular organizations, came with Brethren efforts to relieve the suffering of the Armenian people during 1918–1921.

Denominational membership in the predecessor to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) came in 1941. This was followed by charter membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. The WCC, described more as a movement than an institution, includes more than 348 member churches. This organization was preceded by and based largely upon the World Missionary Conference (1910), the International Missionary Council (1921), and the Universal Conference on Life and Work (1925). The involvement of the Church of the Brethren in the world mission movement inevitably drew the denomination into the ecumenical movement of the 20th century (Ott, 1983). Denominational involvement in state and local councils of churches grew in a parallel fashion. These relationships were delegated to districts and congregations respectively.

The immense destruction caused by World War II and other conflicts provided a rich opportunity for North American and European churches to work together in relief and reconstruction projects. The sheer scale of the efforts undertaken by the Brethren Service Committee during the war led to the purchase of the former Blue Ridge College in New Windsor, Md., in 1944. The renamed Brethren Service Center provided a processing and shipping center for the material aid program of the Church of the Brethren, and as many as 75 denominations. Among the denominational and ecumenical programs using the center were Church World Service, IMA World Health, the National Association of Evangelicals, and Lutheran World Relief (Morse, 1983).

The Church of the Brethren demonstrated a genius for inspiring or organizing aid and assistance projects that began denominationally and became ecumenical partnerships. Among these were Christian Rural Overseas Program (CROP), Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation Vocations (SERRV), and Heifer Project.

On the domestic front, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) was initiated in 1961 to form a new church, “truly evangelical, truly reformed, and truly catholic.” While the Church of the Brethren was involved as an observer/consultant in this process beginning in 1962, the Annual Conference in 1966 declined the invitation of COCU to participate as a full member in the consultation. By 1973 it was clear that organic union of the member denominations was not going to occur. This organization was renamed Churches of Christ Uniting and in 2002 became Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) (Ziegler, 1983).

Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT) emerged in 2006, conceived as an entity that would offer greater space for dialogue and understanding than that provided by either the National Council of Churches or the National Association of Evangelicals. It includes five church “families,” named as Historic Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox,

Evangelical/Pentecostal, and Historic Black. In addition, it includes parachurch organizations. The 2007 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference approved participation of the denomination in CCT.

While institutional expressions of ecumenical engagement have taken the spotlight since World War II, informal expressions of ecumenical relations have influenced some Brethren congregations. The charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s led to informal shared worship and devotional activities across denominational boundaries, although not leading to formal institutions. The series of Brethren conferences on the Holy Spirit reflect a Brethren appropriation of some of the impulses of the charismatic renewal.

An important expression of ecumenical partnership has been in the publishing field, where Brethren Press has long published curricula with other denominations, most notably with the Mennonites. In 1992, the Church of the Brethren joined with the Mennonites to publish *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. Such efforts provide a broader base for distribution and reduce the tendency for unnecessary competition in religious publishing.

The Church of the Brethren has been a full participant in the ecumenical journey in the United States since joining the NCC's predecessor in 1941. While denominational participation has been questioned on occasion—and at times even been controversial—Annual Conference has repeatedly affirmed the importance of our presence at the ecumenical table (see Annual Conference minutes from 1966, 1968, 1982, and 1995). It has been equally clear that denominational identity is important to the membership of the church (as demonstrated by the vote of the 1966 Annual Conference to decline full participation in the Consultation on Church Union and the 1971 approval of an associated relationship short of merger with the American Baptists Churches USA).

The greatest ecumenical contributions by the Church of the Brethren have been our witness to Christian service and matters of peace and war. This influence was named by ecumenical partners in shaping the WCC's focus between the 10th and 11th assemblies, "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace," and in the adoption of the "Statement on the Way of Just Peace" in 2013. It can also be seen in the numerous persons from the Church of the Brethren, in comparison to our overall membership numbers, who have served in responsible positions of leadership in state, national, and international ecumenical organizations.

Communication, cooperation, and peacemaking have been named and upheld in previous Church of the Brethren Annual Conference Statements and Resolutions. This paper echoes and elaborates on the affirmation of and the call for both ecumenical and interfaith engagement expressed in the 1991 AC statement on "Peacemaking: The Calling of God's People in History." That statement includes among its recommendations a call for the Church to "work with those of other denominations, nations, and religions in the interests of peace, while maintaining our Christian witness and proclaiming God's love for all humanity." The delegate body in 2015 affirmed how the protection and safety of Christian minorities is linked to the peacemaking and love of Christ, even in the face of terrible violence. That paper challenges the Church of the Brethren to support persecuted Christians while also remaining "Commit[ted] to interfaith

dialogues and peace initiatives in our communities and across the globe to promote religious tolerance, understanding, and peacebuilding between religious communities.”¹

21ST CENTURY ISSUES

The 21st century is an era where people are increasingly connected through technology and media—across ethnicity, national borders, languages, and cultures—yet also are increasingly polarized and divided along ideological lines. At times, these dividing lines are political, ethnic, religious, or a blurry mix of all three. This globalized world allows us to offer Christ’s living water in the wilderness but has also tempted us to poison streams of water through distrust and selfish ambition. Arrogance about assuming any one group has the answers to social problems or broader global challenges—without needing to listen to others—creates idolatry instead of abiding faith.

Though religious demographics (affiliation, level of participation, and geographic concentration) are changing around the world, religion continues to be an integral part of human existence. It shapes lives at individual, family, community, national, and global levels. Religion is expressed through personal practice and often through membership in a church, mosque, synagogue, temple, or other setting. Religious groups host seminars, events, worship gatherings, and trainings. Religious institutions conduct advocacy on issues of religious freedom and conscience, while also lending their moral voices to issues of social justice. Religion shapes behavior and values, providing meaning and guidance to how adherents engage with the world. Choosing to believe and follow a faith tradition—or intentionally choosing not to—is an act that places one within a tradition, provides group identity, and shapes how one understands their society.

Christianity remains the majority religion in the United States and the world, but religious diversity is increasing both domestically and globally (Pew Research Center, 2015a; Pew Research Center, 2015b). In 2014, people identified as Christian made up 70.6 percent of the US population, with 46.5 percent Protestant, 20.8 percent Catholic, and fewer than 1 percent Orthodox Christian. The percentage of persons identifying with religions other than Christianity (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions) composed 5.9 percent of the US population (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Within the United States, increased religious diversity is also marked by the rapid rise of the “nones,” or the religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2012). While some of these “nones” are atheists or agnostics, the largest and most growing proportion are those who are “nothing in particular” (Pew, 2015a). As individuals increasingly separate their personal faith from participating in and belonging to the institutional church, new and more individualistic forms of commitment have developed. Persons who are “spiritual but not religious” present a new challenge to congregations and their broader denominations. In addition to learning how to share the gospel to the “nones” (which is beyond the scope of this paper), Church of the Brethren congregations are tasked with finding ways to join with non-affiliated persons in service and peacemaking.

¹ Additional support for this work can be found within other denominational guidance, such as the General Board Resolution, “A Resolution on the Events and Aftermath of September 11, 2001,” the 2008 AC Resolution on Slavery in the 21st Century, and the 2011 AC Resolution on the War in Afghanistan.

September 11, 2001, was a watershed event for global affairs—an act of terror that has affected global politics and relationships between religions. Globally, religious identity conflict and mistrust is prevalent. Within the United States specifically, similar trends are occurring and the number of “social hostilities involving religion” have increased overall (Pew Research Center, 2015c).

Survey research shows that American attitudes are most positive toward Jews, Catholics, and evangelical Christians and least positive toward most non-Judeo-Christian religions or sects (Pew Research Center, 2014). Generally, respondents viewed Jews, Catholics, and evangelical Christians “warmly”; Hindus, Buddhists, and Mormons “neutrally”; and Muslims and atheists “coldly.” Knowing a Muslim is associated with more positive feelings about Muslims: Those who had existing relationships were more likely rate Muslims as neutral, and those who did not were more likely to rate their feelings towards Muslims as “cool.” Only 38 percent of respondents reported knowing a Muslim.

Our attitudes and opinions about other faiths can be shaped by accurate and reliable sources that reflect diversity within different religions; they also can be informed by rumors, assumptions, stereotypes, and outright lies. Social psychological research indicates that negative opinions about certain identities can lead to prejudice (Abrams, 2010). Discrimination and prejudice can harm those who are targeted, in a number of ways (Link & Phelan, 2001; Abrams, 2010). Hate crimes against Muslim and Sikh communities have risen since 9/11; attacks against Hindus and Jews surge and decrease often (The Pluralism Project, 2013). Overall, the United States has seen an increase in “social hostilities involving religion” (Pew Research Center, 2015c).

During the 20th century, Christian dialogue with non-Christian religions increased, some of due in part from Catholic openness following the Second Vatican Council. In the US, growing religious diversity has also prompted non-Christian faiths to reach out to Christian neighbors and improve interreligious understanding. Presently, interfaith engagement and cooperation in the US take many forms: formal and informal dialogue, informative panels on world religions, service and volunteering, meals, and public advocacy on shared issues of religious concern (poverty, the environment, and more).

As followers of Jesus in the Church of the Brethren, a historic and living peace church, how do we understand our faith amid religious diversity—diversity existing within our own Christian faith and within the religious sphere of the US and our world? Loving our neighbor must involve understanding our neighbor—accurately. What responsibilities do Christians have for learning about other Christian denominations and communions, and non-Christian religions? In what ways can Christians work together with other Christians and with non-Christians? How can we demonstrate peaceful coexistence in a century marked by religious identity conflict? How can we testify to Christ’s peace in learning to understand human differences and, in doing so, speak truth to the “nones” who have been disillusioned with faith?

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper was prepared for the 2017 Annual Conference, which felt especially fitting as 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Although styles of worship,

theological practices, and positions sometimes emphasize our differences, the Reformation calls us to look at Jesus' desired unity for believers, and to envision ways all of God's people can work in partnership toward common goals. Recognizing the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century, the Church of the Brethren has an important—and distinctly unique—witness to offer the wider world and is strengthened by cooperation with other faith traditions.

We affirm the ways the Church of the Brethren has engaged and continues to be represented in ecumenical bodies. Beyond continued participation, we make the following recommendations. The first commitments and principles are guides for all Brethren, at individual, congregational, district, and denominational levels, to live out our call to follow in the footsteps of Christ. These basic ways of showing respect and care for neighbors and strangers, as scripture teaches, are seeds of ecumenical and interfaith engagement, watered by God's Spirit. Other recommendations grow from these beginning commitments.

- We will continue to build and nurture positive relationships with other faith communities. In doing so, we strengthen a history of service and missions, disaster response and relief ministries, and peace witness—nationally and globally. These relationships further our understanding of opportunities for mission and ministry, and they instill a cooperative readiness to act upon needs and areas of common concern when they arise.
- In all of our relationships, we will demonstrate the gift of Christ-like respect and civility. This is one of the greatest witnesses we can give in continuing the work of Jesus in an often uncivil world.
- As we engage with others, we will be honest and explicit about our interests and intentions. As we bring who we are—Christians in the Church of the Brethren—to the table of discussion and collaboration, we can learn about who others are while maintaining our own beliefs in Jesus Christ. In specific times when we are evangelizing, we will not intimidate or demean others (“no force in religion”).
- In ecumenical and interfaith relationships, we will welcome opportunities to serve God and our neighbors. At times, that means recognizing and seeking to overcome our own fears and sources of division. In all relationships, we will be intentional in seeking unity and community.
- We will seek out common good, especially when encountering the “other.” We will practice the golden rule as it is lived out in Christian and other expressions of faith. Part of our commitment is to live in the struggle between affirming Christian faith and practice, and respecting what other traditions proclaim.
- We will seek out and enter into interfaith dialogue with other religious traditions as opportunity occurs, to improve understanding and peaceful coexistence in US society and around the globe.

The following recommendations are strongly suggested for their respective levels of church life. While we recognize that not every level may have the resources available, earnestly trying to put them into practice serves to strengthen the Church of the Brethren's ability to live out our calling as peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and as ministers of Christ's reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5: 18-21).

Recommendations to individuals and congregations

- Every member of the Church of the Brethren is challenged to take seriously the meaning of Jesus' prayer that all his followers be one (John 17:20-24).
- Congregations are encouraged to offer opportunities (classes, workshops, special services) for members to understand neighbors. One goal of these opportunities is to encourage dialogue and understanding about how the Church of the Brethren is part of the larger body of Christ. This understanding will build awareness of who we are as Brethren and how we are connected to other sisters and brothers in Christ. It will also identify points of connection and divergence between Christianity and other world religions.
- Congregations are encouraged to communicate with local religious groups and to participate in community opportunities for worship and service, such as pulpit exchanges, intentional dialogue series, community worship services, and other gatherings designed to bring a community together. CROP Walks, workcamps, food pantries, and other local Christian and interfaith initiatives are examples of service that focuses on human needs and values that are common to major faith traditions.
- Congregations are encouraged to provide time and encouragement for pastors to participate in local ministerial associations and other ecumenical efforts, as well as to participate in interfaith dialogue and service opportunities.

Recommendations to districts and regions

- Districts are encouraged to support ecumenical bodies by maintaining membership in, actively participating in, and financially supporting state and/or regional councils of churches.
- Districts are encouraged to support interfaith initiatives to improve quality of life issues, such as restorative justice work, refugee resettlement, and environmental efforts.

Recommendations to the denomination

- The denomination is encouraged to continue to seek ways to identify and offer Brethren ideals of service and peacemaking in ecumenical gatherings, and continue to be a voice that calls for nonviolent work for justice at national and global levels. The Office of Public Witness can help identify needs and opportunities for cooperative work.
- The denomination is encouraged to partner with interfaith bodies to address human need, equality, poverty, homelessness, refugees, and to protect religious minorities. We can share in dialogue and acts of service without compromising Christian and specifically Brethren values.
- Annual Conference is encouraged to utilize Bethany Theological Seminary and the Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership, including the Academy Certified Training System, as a resource in studying the history and promise of the ecumenical movement in all of its manifestations as part of ministerial formation.

- The Annual Conference officers and the general secretary are encouraged to continue to provide for representation at the annual meetings of other branches of the Schwarzenau Brethren movement, as well as continued conversation on how we might work together as opportunity arises.
- At the discretion of the general secretary, an advisory committee may be appointed to advise and assist with ecumenical and interfaith issues, and to represent the denomination when time or circumstance do not allow representation by the general secretary.

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APPENDIX A

Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

One of the challenges of communication is understanding what we mean by the words we use. The following glossary gives the study committee's understanding of terms used in this paper, as well as some terms used in ecumenical circles, many of which the Church of the Brethren is a part. Additionally, some of the acronyms included in the paper are included here for easy reference.

CCT – Christian Churches Together. Its purpose statement is as follows: “The purpose of Christian Churches Together is to enable churches and national Christian organizations to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian witness in the world.” It began in 2001, and there are currently 39 participant bodies.

Communion — A group of Christians who hold a common set of beliefs or doctrines. Some use the term as a synonym for denomination.

COCU — Consultation on Church Union.

CUIC — Churches Uniting in Christ.

Denomination – A particular body of Christians or a branch within Christianity, e.g., the Church of the Brethren, American Baptist Churches, Mennonite Church USA. Some use the term “communion” as a synonym for denomination.

Ecumenism – The movement toward Christian cooperation and unity.

Full communion partners – Two or more denominations that have formed a relationship by which they share in local and international mission. While each denomination maintains its own identity, clergy may serve as pastors in one another's churches and the traditions have reached general agreement on matters of baptism and communion. Partners may not agree on all matters of faith and doctrine.

Global Christian Forum – A gathering of Christian churches and interchurch organizations across a broad spectrum of faith and practice with a purpose of respecting one another and encouraging common mission and challenges.

Interfaith – Partnerships, communication, or gatherings that bring people of differing faiths or understandings together for a common goal or purpose.

Interreligious – For many, interreligious has the same meaning as interfaith. However, the World Council of Churches uses interreligious to refer to actions between Christian groups.

NCC – National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Founded in 1950, it is made up of 37 member communions. Its mission statement is as follows: “The NCC is a community of

communions called by Christ to visible unity and sent forth in the Spirit to promote God's justice, peace, and the healing of the world.”

Nondenominational – Having no direct connection to any specific denomination or communion.

Oikoumene – A Greek word meaning “the whole inhabited earth.” It is the origin of the word *ecumenical* and used as part of the logo of the WCC.

WCC – World Council of Churches. An international gathering of Christian bodies that fully came into being in 1948. With approximately 345 member communions, it is the largest ecumenical body. World assemblies are held approximately every eight years. Member bodies share in the mission statement: “A worldwide fellowship of churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service.”

APPENDIX B

Survey Overview

As preparation for this Annual Conference study paper, the Committee for an Ecumenical Vision for the 21st Century conducted a survey on Christian and Interfaith Relationships, from May to June 2014. The committee invited past Annual Conference delegates, Young Adult Conference attendees (2012), district ministry leaders, and Mission and Ministry Board members via email, and received 74 completed surveys. Participant demographics can be found in the charts below:

Demographic Category		<i>N</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>	Women	27	36.49
	Men	45	60.81
	Prefer not to Answer	2	2.70
<i>Age</i>	18-20	1	1.4%
	21-29	4	5.4%
	30-39	8	10.8%
	40-49	9	12.2%
	50-59	18	24.3%
	60 or older	34	45.9%
<i>Type</i>	Annual Conf. delegate	56	75.7%
	Young Adult Conf.	5	6.8%
	District ministries	29	39.2%
	Mission and Ministry Board	7	9.5%

Demographic Category		<i>N</i>	%
<i>Ethnicity</i>	White	69	93.2%
	Black or African-American	0	0
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0
	Asian	0	0
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0
	From multiple races	0	0
	Hispanic or Latino	0	0
	Prefer not to answer	3	4.1%
	Other*	3	4.1%

*Those who identified as “Other” specified that they were “multiethnic” (1) and “human” (2).

Limitations of sample

As mentioned in the body of the paper, the survey sample had several limitations. Survey participants chose whether or not to respond to the email, limiting our findings to people who saw it relevant or meaningful to answer the survey. The survey was not representative of all ages or ethnicities within the Church of the Brethren and had a higher proportion of men. Further research is needed to understand how young people and people of color in the Church of the Brethren perceive and are involved with other Christians and other faiths. Despite these limitations, the study committee was able to utilize the survey findings to shape and inform this paper.

What we asked

We asked about relationships with other Christians, looking at what joys, benefits, and challenges existed for individuals, their churches, and the denomination. We also asked about relationships with other faiths, and sought to learn what particular joys, benefits, and challenges existed at the individual, congregational, and denominational levels. We wanted to know what people were doing—what brought them joy, what benefits they thought were brought from that work, and what the struggles were.