UB 2. Vitality and Viability

Origin of the Study

The 2015 Annual Conference returned the “Query: Future District Structure,” but decided to address concerns raised by the query regarding vitality and viability within congregations, districts, and the denomination as a whole, including but not limited to district structure. A study committee was formed and requested to report back to the 2017 Annual Conference.

Query: Future District Structure

Whereas: Districts have experienced a decline in membership and financial support;

Whereas: A number of districts due to financial pressure have had to reduce staff and/or move from full time to part time staff positions;

Whereas: Some districts through larger membership or by closing of churches and sales of properties have more than adequate financial resources while other districts struggle to support a part time executive and struggle financially to have that executive represent them in denominational circles and life;

Whereas: Middle judicatories in general are increasingly in trouble and their role and value questioned;

Whereas: These trends are likely to continue and it is better to plan proactively rather than to have to respond in the midst of a future crisis;

Whereas: It has been a significant period of time since the Church of the Brethren has considered district structure;

Therefore: We, the Mid-Atlantic District Leadership Team, convened in business meeting on August 23, 2014, petition the Annual Conference through the Mid-Atlantic District Conference meeting at Manassas, VA, October 10-11, 2014, to review and evaluate our current district structure and bring recommendations for future structure that will enable essential functions while responsively addressing the challenges of changing membership, financial, and cultural realities of district ministry as we seek to move into the future God intends for us.

Action of the Mid-Atlantic District Church of the Brethren Leadership Team: At its August 23, 2014 meeting, the Leadership Team approved the “Query: Future District Structure” for consideration by the Mid-Atlantic District Conference meeting on October 11, 2014.

Christopher Stockslager, Mid-Atlantic District Leadership Team Chair
Anna Poole, Mid-Atlantic District Clerk

Action of the Mid-Atlantic District Conference held October 11, 2014, in Manassas, Virginia: All were unanimously in favor of adopting the Query and forwarding it to Standing Committee for presentation at the 2015 Annual Conference.

Craig Stutzman, Mid-Atlantic District Moderator
Anna Poole, Mid-Atlantic District Clerk
**Action of the 2015 Annual Conference:** Annual Conference adopted the recommendation of Standing Committee that the “Query: Future District Structure” be returned to the Mid-Atlantic District, but that a study committee be chosen to address concerns raised by the query regarding vitality and viability within congregations, districts, and the denomination as a whole, including but not limited to district structure.

The study committee selected during Annual Conference consists of:

- two persons elected by the delegate body: Larry Dentler (Southern Pennsylvania) and Shayne T. Petty (Southern Ohio);
- two persons appointed by Standing Committee: Sonja P. Griffith (Western Plains) and Craig Smith (Atlantic Northeast);
- one denominational staff member appointed by the general secretary: Mary Jo Flory-Steury (associate general secretary).

The study committee is requested to report back to the 2017 Annual Conference.

**2016 Report of the Vitality and Viability Committee**

The Vitality and Viability (V&V) Study Committee met November 16-18, 2015, at the General Offices in Elgin, IL. The purpose of this meeting was to begin to understand the task that has been assigned to us by the Annual Conference in the 2015 action that included the return of the Mid-Atlantic District query, “Future District Structure,” but formed this committee to “address the concerns of the query regarding vitality and viability within congregations, districts, and the denomination as a whole, including but not limited to district structure.” Considerable time was spent in prayer, Scripture and discussion of the parameters of the query and the course of direction for our work.

The following tasks were defined as “tools” to help us work at the assignment:

1. Ask district executives from each district to send us “word pictures” of a congregation or two that exhibits vitality. Task completed.
2. Make initial contact with the Review & Evaluation Committee to discuss how our assignments overlap. Task completed.
3. Make initial contact with the Council of District Executives to discuss their interaction with our work. Task completed.
4. Develop Scripture resources for Vitality. In process.
5. Develop “Tool Box” of resources for Vitality. In process.

The committee met again by conference call on February 9, 2016. The following plans were set in place:

1. Develop list of questions for V&V committee member interviews with congregations that the district executives referred us to.
2. Plan for a third meeting in Elizabethtown, PA, May 3-5, 2016.
3. Request a face-to-face meeting with the Council of District Executives during their pre-Annual Conference meetings.

4. Finalize plans for a hearing at Annual Conference, Wednesday, June 29.

5. Finalize plans for a face-to-face meeting with the Review and Evaluation Committee in Dayton, OH, August 29-31, 2016.

The committee understands the vital importance of our work for this time in the life of our Church. We seek your prayers as we continue these efforts on your behalf.

Shayne Petty, chair
Larry Dentler, recorder
Mary Jo Flory-Steury
Sonja Griffith
Craig Smith

**Action of the 2016 Annual Conference:** The report was presented by the study committee's recorder Larry Dentler, accompanied by committee members John Jantzi, who replaced Craig Smith; Stan Dueck, who replaced Mary Jo Flory-Steury; and Sonja Griffith. The written and oral reports of the Vitality and Viability study committee were received as information for the delegates.

**2017 Report of the Vitality and Viability Committee**

The Vitality and Viability Study Committee had its origins with the query submitted by the Mid-Atlantic District in 2015. The query “Future District Structure” was returned to Mid-Atlantic District, but a study committee was formed to “address concerns raised by the query regarding vitality and viability within congregations, districts and the denomination as a whole, including but not limited to district structure.”

During the ensuing two years, other study committees have been formed as a result of additional queries brought to Annual Conference. We share common concerns that our work not overlap and each committee address unique features per our assignments from Annual Conference.

Also during these two years there has been a significant turnover of committee personnel. The Vitality and Viability Committee in its current form was not finalized until the summer of 2016. At the 2016 Conference the committee held a hearing, gave an interim report, and was granted a year’s extension in order to more diligently fulfill our mandate from Annual Conference.

Since last year’s Conference, the Vitality and Viability Committee has held a joint conversation with the Review and Evaluation Committee in August and engaged in further study. Much work has been done and we will be sharing the progress for feedback at hearings during the 2017 Conference.

The committee requests one more additional year to bring our final report to the 2018 Annual Conference.
Respectfully submitted,

John Jantzi, chair
Larry Dentler, recorder
Stan Dueck
Sonja Griffith

**Action of the 2017 Annual Conference:** Annual Conference received an interim report from the committee and granted an additional year of study.

**2018 Report of the Vitality and Viability Committee**

**PREAMBLE**

The Vitality and Viability Study Committee had its origins with the query submitted by the Mid-Atlantic District in 2015. The query “Future District Structure” was returned to Mid-Atlantic but a study committee was formed to “address concerns raised by the query regarding vitality and viability within congregations, districts and the denomination as a whole, including but not limited to district structure.”

During the ensuing two years other study committees have been formed/impacted as a result of additional queries brought to Annual Conference. We share common concerns that our work not overlap and each committee address unique features per our assignments from Annual Conference.

Vitality and Viability Study Committee met several times in 2016 beginning in February, another conversation in May and a joint conversation with Review and Evaluation in August. Additional conversations among committee members occurred in 2017. During the time since the committee was formed there has been a significant turnover of committee members. Thus, a year’s extension was granted in order to more diligently fulfill our mandate from Annual Conference.

**Audacious Hope**

Vitality and Viability’s work has been framed in conversation with Jeremiah 32. This passage of scripture speaks of the purchase of a plot of land by Jeremiah even as Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonians. Jeremiah bought the land, wrote the deed of purchase containing the terms and conditions, and stored them in a clay jar so the documents last a long time. (Jeremiah 32:13-15.) This was done in the presence of witnesses and bore witness to Jeremiah’s faith that God would restore Israel’s fortune.

This story of audacious hope is the story that we claim for our life together as the Church of the Brethren. We are not facing the same kind of direct threat that the Hebrew’s were facing, yet we too are in need of actions that speak of our hope in a future with God. What is the land God is asking us to purchase? What is the deed of purchase God is asking us to sign? Where is the
secure place that deed can be stored? What are the dreams of restoration and renewal that grip our soul? How do we express audacious hope during this time of struggle for God’s guidance?

Confession and Purpose

Vitality and Viability’s work has been structured in conversation with Review and Evaluation Study Committee and representatives from the Ministry and Mission Board. We trust that our joint efforts will form a tapestry of shared vision that will be of benefit greater than each of us functioning alone.

Two overarching concerns were discussed at length in Vitality and Viability and form the context for our work.

1. The Church of the Brethren is in the midst of significant polarities regarding human sexuality/same sex marriage that have deepened over the past several years. We acknowledge these polarities have their roots in a variety of causes, including the widening gulf in our differing approaches to scripture. As this divide has grown we confess that we have not treated each other very well, that our conversations have not always demonstrated the Spirit of Christ.

   We recognize the possibility that some congregations may leave because of the integrity of deeply held beliefs. We grieve this division but recognize that any conversation regarding vitality needs to account for this scenario. Thus we affirm that vitality in this context means:

   a. forming a process to ensure that congregations who may leave do so in an accountable, amicable and gracious process. This means avoiding litigation and instead seeking to mutually bless rather than forestall unnecessarily.

   b. clarifying the changing scope and force of Annual Conference. We recognize the growing gulf between polity and practice and the need to define the locus of authority once again. The Church of the Brethren has rooted its understanding of authority in the Pietist and Anabaptist theological traditions. We call for a re-visiting of these theological streams to achieve a balance in our approach to covenant and conscience, to authority and guidance. We confess that we use principles such as authority, scriptural interpretation and forbearance in our own self-interest.

2. Engage an appreciative visioning which unites us around commonly held values. One of these is finding a third-way of dealing with differing perspectives points of view, especially when we seem to be at an impasse. This appreciative visioning could include the reaffirmation of the Love Feast, anointing and baptism as central ordinances. Core values such as gathering around Christ and the Word, primacy of relationships both vertically and horizontally, service in the name of Christ, peace and nonresistance, and other identified values be named and reaffirmed as that which brings us together.
In conversation with Review and Evaluation we have acknowledged that on-going structural/organizational issues are best addressed by their work. We recognize that the Compelling Vision process may address many of our concerns. The Vitality and Viability Study Committee believes we best serve the denomination by articulating matters of the heart and calling us to a time of renewal of relationships with our Lord and Savior and with each other. The following structure is submitted for your discernment and use.

**Introduction**

**A Year of Sabbath Rest and Renewal**

In the relationship between Yahweh and the ancient Hebrews, provision was made for the renewal of relationships between God and the people and also renewal of relationships with one another. While evidence regarding the full practice of a Sabbath Year is rather murky the intent of such a time is clear. The Sabbath Year was to be practiced every 7th year and was a time of intentionality of practice and focus. During this seventh year, all debts were to be forgiven, (Duet. 15: 1-12), Hebrew servants/slaves were to be released except in cases where they chose to remain in servitude (Exodus 21:1-6) and the law was to be read Duet: 31:9-13. Even the land was to rest (Leviticus 25:4).

We recognize that our context is different and it is unrealistic and unwise to take extended “rest” from the business of the denomination. Like the ancient Hebrews, however, our life together is in danger of fragmentation and splintering. The Church of the Brethren is also in need of a time of Sabbath Rest with the intentional seeking of reconciliation and renewal. Vitality and Viability calls for intentionality of practice(s) be centered on Christ the Living Word and our study of the written Word together. The purpose is not to process issues of import but to engage together in our common study/prayer for God to “Move in Our Midst.”

During this time of intentionality, we believe the nurturing of vulnerability and honesty is critical. Isaiah began his call to ministry with the following words, “Woe is me! I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:5) That dual confession of neediness yet seeing the glory of God continues to speak with power to our context.

As we met together Vitality and Viability identified four practices of Christian community that are of central importance to our time of Sabbath Rest. For the purpose of the paper, these are the working definitions:

1. **Confession:** confession is acknowledging our human inclination of self-justification and self-defense of our acts toward others and declaring of a change of conviction or course of conduct on our part. Christian Confession is expressing a conviction of the heart as a result of God’s transforming Spirit. It comes from a spiritual motivation that moves one to reconcile with others.

   1 Timothy 6:12; Hebrews 3:1, 4:14; Acts 19:18; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:11
2. **Courage** means to move beyond our comfort zone, being vulnerable to one another, willing to consider deeply held assumptions and perceptions, and living open to the Spirit of God who works to the transform us and reconcile all creation.

   2 Samuel 7:27; Mark 6:50; Acts 4:13; 23:1; Philippians 1:20

3. **Humility**: We involve people whom our congregations connect to, considering their suggestions, admitting we aren’t perfect nor have all the answers, while demonstrating growth in our faith and personal journey.

   Proverbs 15:33; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 5:5

4. **Discipline** to implement and develop maturing and effective spiritual behaviors / habits / processes as an outcome of our faith in God through Christ, and life together in community.

   Proverbs 25:28; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Timothy 1:5-8; Titus 1:8

This time of intentionality is not only about ourselves and our life together. We are called to renewal in order to be ministers together in the name of Jesus. As the committee discussed language that describes our yearning to proclaim and live the Good News of Jesus, the word lost came into focus. We were not of one persuasion as to the meaning of “lost” for mission but agreed that the Gospel of Christ came “to seek and save that which is lost.” (Luke 19:10) This seeking and saving restores individual’s relationship with God through Jesus Christ and transforms lives and ways of living in the midst of the lost-ness of our communities. That dual purpose of restoration and transformation of the lost is already at work among us. Listen to the winds of the Spirit as we consider examples of vitality in the Church of the Brethren.

What does Vitality and Viability look like. Listen to the winds of the Spirit as we consider examples of vitality in the Church of the Brethren.

**Illinois-Wisconsin District**

**Rockford Community Church**

One example of the Rockford Community Church is that they received a small bus, converted it into a book-mobile, collected thousands of books, and shipped the bookmobile and books to Nigeria. The Rockford Church’s next big project was converting a small travel trailer into a technology lab to be used in the Rockford Area. The lab will offer training in a variety of technology related opportunities, e.g. production of video presentations. The church has a local as well as global mission perspective. Pastor Samuel Sarpiya, who is from Nigeria, is instrumental in leading the fellowship in this larger-picture mission focus.

**Northern Indiana District**

**Lincolnshire Church of the Brethren**

Lincolnshire Church of the Brethren finds itself with a demographic gap in membership, many of the long-term members are past the age of retirement and few are members in the productive years between 50 and 65. Faced with the lack of members to take over the tasks required to sustain the congregation and its outreach ministries, this congregation did not despair. Instead the
turned to the E3 Program for church evangelism and outreach. Despite this program pushing them outside their comfort zone, the members have embraced outreach and are beginning to reach out in small groups to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout one of the more depressed regions of Fort Wayne.

**West Marva District**

**Oak Park Church of the Brethren**

The Oak Park congregation, in Oakland MD, was decimated in 2009-2010 as the previous pastor and 122 members left on the same Sunday to start a new non-denominational church in the community. Following the ministry of a retired minister as an interim pastor for 12 months, the congregation called Carl Fike as its pastor. The congregation is thriving. There has been, in the 5 years following, an increase in membership and attendance is more than double. The congregation is experiencing vitality in the following ministries:

- Monthly Free Food and Fellowship (feeding 150-200 people from the community and membership).
- Monthly Men’s Fellowship features a $2 breakfast (35-40 men participate with men doing all the cooking) There is no program just fellowship.
- The food pantry participates in the Maryland Food Bank organization and distributes food to an average of 150 families each month.
- A local Boy Scout troop meets at the church.
- A prayer shawl ministry group meets weekly as does a quilting ministry group, as well.
- Worship has slowly transitioned from traditional to blended, and average attendance has risen from the 50’s to the 140’s.
- Oak Park provides administrative oversight for two orphanages in Bolivia. This involves funding as well as two annual trips with a couple dozed persons participating in work camp ministry at the orphanages.
- Mothers Morning Out and Kids Play Group occurs each Thursday.

Paraphrasing John 21:25, “The Church of the Brethren, because of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, does many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”

**Sabbath Rest and Renewal**

**A Denomination of Many Tongues**

Acts Two describes the work of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost during which people from multiple ethnicities and language became one as the Holy Spirit moved and guided. “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one them speaking in the native language of each.” (Acts: 2:5-6) We, as Church of the Brethren, also stand with the same possibilities for unity and power as these early disciples.

Many of our most vital congregations are non-Germanic and non-traditional in origin and focus. Our Nigerian brothers and sisters continue to be vital despite intense pressure. Our Hispanic, Haitian, African-American and fresh expression congregations have much to contribute to the larger whole.
Vitality and Viability asks for a time of deliberative listening to the full diversity of the Spirit’s movement among the Church of the Brethren. We confess …

- That we sometimes desire everyone to be the same.
- That conflict is part of our history as the Church of the Brethren but we seek the mind of Christ in ways to discern the Spirit so to move forward as a part of the Body of Christ.
- That the issues dividing us are not so much theological as they are cultural and rooted in history.
- We acknowledge that many of the polarities among us have their roots in a variety of causes, including the widening gulf in our differing approaches to scripture.
- We let culture define our local churches at the expense of our brothers and sisters.

We request an entering into a time of listening to these voices, not simply to hear stories, but to discern the voice of the Spirit and asking what we can learn from the movement of God among the many ways God is speaking to us. We envision this happening in a variety of ways:

1. Written word on the meaning of renewal and revival from more than our Germanic and traditional congregations.
2. Pulpit exchanges.
3. Groupings/gatherings led by the full diversity of leadership among us. The gatherings would be to learn ways of encountering the Spirit of God anew.
4. Exchanges of peoples and congregations worshipping and learning together.
5. Encouraging other ways that local congregations can encounter and embrace diversity.
6. Storytelling through social media.
7. Experiences that stem from Annual Conference and District gatherings.

**A Church of Many Tongues**

The people who make up the church come from a variety of places, for example including Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo (Africa Great Lakes), Dominican Republic, Haiti, India, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, Rwanda (African Great Lakes), Spain, United States, and Venezuela.

**Vitality in Haiti by Michaela Camps Alphonse**

After a time of trials and troubles, the pastor announces “Church, it’s time for a revival!” The church leaders have already agreed and the congregation hums their amens. Excitement ripples through the air. Preparations begin!

The leaders pray and invite the Presence of God. All is vain without God’s presence. Check!

The search is on for a song leader or two, filled with the Holy Spirit’s passion to take one beyond the worries & sorrows of life. Oh, and they have to be able to sing and move if the Spirit says move! Check!
Preachers that know the Word of God and can speak it plain are given a night for the week-long revival. Only those that love the people and can remind them they are loved by God… with a bit of a charisma, too. Check!

The time has come. The music starts. Voices raise in song.

“Jezu te pran fado m,
Mwen pat kapab pote!
Wi, Jezu te pran fado-m, Li peye det peche!
Tout krent mwen yo te soti,
Li fe ke-m tou kontan;
Paske Jezi pran fado-m
E Li te ban-m yon chan”

(Translated:
Jesus took my burdens;
I couldn't carry it.
Yes, Jesus took my burdens. He paid the debt of sin.
All my fears are gone.
He made my heart so happy.
Because Jesus took my burdens
And He gave me a song.)

It’s a warm night in the church. One could hear from outside the church people singing, “A-a-a-men! Hallelujah!”. The congregation is on its feet, dancing to the music with hands raised in the air. The song leader, sweating and exuberant, leads the congregation in joyful, soulful praise throughout the night.

A Glimpse of the Naperville Church of the Brethren by Dennis Webb

The Naperville Church of the Brethren is a multicultural congregation. Over 85 percent of its members are of Indian descent. In addition there are a few Caucasian families and two black families – one African-American and the other is the pastor’s family from Jamaica. Historically, because Indian Christians were converts from Hinduism, they had to leave their Hindu communities and form separate Christian communities. In those communities, there are five pillars—the school, the adjoining hostel, the hospital, sometimes a farm, and in the center was the church. It was a self-sustaining community. The church was central to the life of the Indian community. Spirituality was at its core.

In the Naperville congregation, for the older members of the Indian community who struggle with speaking English, we have used translation equipment to have the sermon understood in their native Gujarati language. Our Sunday morning worship contains a simple song, which uses both English and Gujarati words. The Indian community also expects very regular pastoral home visits. Strong biblically based preaching is also important to them. We are the only congregation in the denomination that plays the game of cricket at our annual picnic. Also, the church is the only one in the denomination that is led by a pastor from Jamaica. This interplay of Jamaican,
American, and Indian cultural traditions accounts for some of the vitality of our church. There is never a dull day in this congregation.

A Glimpse of Jamaican Culture

“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our mind.” Bob Marley

As a former British colony comprised of former slavers, most Jamaicans are of African ancestry. Although Jamaica is 98 percent black, it has a mixture of British and African cultural traditions. It is relatively conservative Caribbean island with traditional family values. Jamaica is also a relatively poor country with generally very friendly people.

When all the above is ‘pureed,’ the outcome is a people characterized by resiliency, self-confidence, ambition, a fairly high level of intercultural competence, prone to quarrels and contentiousness, deep spiritual foundation, family oriented, easy going nature, and welcoming of strangers. Bob Marley not only made authentic Jamaican reggae music popular worldwide, but also reminds every Jamaican not to be enslaved by the darkness of our past, but by the hopes of our future. Jamaicans are a hopeful people. I am one. I should know!

A Glimpse of Jamaican Churches

The Jamaican church evolved as a cross between African and British worship expressions. Lots of singing. Loudly! ‘healing worship services.’ British hymnals juxtaposed with traditional Jamaican church songs. Lots of outward expression of emotions. Participatory worship. Strong Bible-based preaching. Significant female participation in church leadership. Prominent Sunday school program. All of these constitute the bedrock of Jamaican church life and worship.

Historically (although it is now changing), the church was the bedrock/center of the community. Church vitality is reflected in its music, its charismatic preacher and preaching, its inclusiveness, its nurturing of the youth through Sunday school, and its rootedness in local communities. Gone are the days when the church was dependent upon ‘foreign missionary bodies’ for financial viability and sustainability. Members, generally in their humble economic circumstances, give tithes and offerings, which makes the church financially self-sustaining. Pastoral leadership is comprised of both educated, trained clergy, as well as, untrained, zealous, committed persons who rise up to become church leaders. This is a synopsis of church vitality and viability in Jamaica.

A Glimpse of Indian Culture

Indian culture fundamentally centers around family. Elders are held in high regard. Multiple generations live together for long periods. The extended family is not seen as ‘extended,’ but real family. Indians are perhaps one of the most hospitable people on the planet when you visit their homes. To a large extent, the Indian community is ‘shy’ and tends to be very reserved. Men typically take the leading roles both in family life and in the church. The biannual Love Feast is perhaps the most significant worship service for the Indian community. Although most of the
marriages are arranged, they generally do very well. Church attendance is a priority for the community.

This is a dynamic example of the variety of voices that make up the Church of the Brethren.

**Sabbath Rest and Renewal**

**Bible Study and Prayer**

The Church of the Brethren affirms the centrality of Jesus Christ for our life together. We also affirm that the New Testament as “our only creed.” The Living Word (Christ) and the written word (Scripture) form the foundation for renewal and ministry.

Two of the baptismal vows from “For all Who Minister” state these understandings in a succinct, powerful manner:

1. Do you believe that Jesus is God’s Son and do you receive and trust him as your Savior and Lord? (Jesus, the Living Word)
2. Do you promise to live in keeping with the teachings and spirit of the New Testament? (Scripture, the written word.)

Vitality and Viability call for the renewal of these two baptismal vows. We seek to covenant together to seek the mind of Christ through the study of scripture and the practice of prayer. As we do so we believe our relationship to the living Christ will be renewed and emboldened. We also believe that gathering around the Living and written Word will renew and strengthen our covenant with each other.

Vitality and Viability has identified five scripture texts around themes of renewal and reconciliation that we invite the church to study together. Each of these texts will have a brief commentary developed by gifted expositors in the Church of the Brethren. Each text will also be augmented by stories of renewal and reconciliation from within the denomination bearing witness to the Living Christ’s work among us. Vitality and Viability will develop study and prayer guides to assist in the study of these texts.

The texts selected are:

- Isaiah 61:1-9  
  Israel’s Jubilee by Steven Schweitzer
- Jeremiah 32:1-15  
  Audacious Hope by Carol Scheppard
  Cost of Being a Disciple of Jesus by Harold S. Martin
- John 15  
  Renewal of Relationships by Erin Matteson
- Ephesians 2:14-18  
  Unity in Christ by Alan Stucky

We recognize that implementing denominational wide study and prayer requires careful thought and attention. We anticipate these resources will be available for groups of leaders (Pastors), District Bible studies together or congregational Bible Studies. We will work carefully with Districts to understand the best way of working in concert with each other.
SUMMARY FOR VITALITY AND VIABILITY PAPER

As we have written this paper, we have given you many things that lead to vitality and viability to consider as you read. We have given you scriptures, Bible study materials to use, case studies and examples, and stories from many different cultures. We believe that these should foster a sense of what vitality and viability are about. As we have considered viability and vitality, we have realized that, at times, these are not just about numbers. They are about the qualities of encouragement and service and compassion and eagerness and courage and grace and patience and love that exist in our congregations.

Vitality and viability are even present when people are faced with difficulties. At times, vitality and viability seem to be challenging. The church faces times of conflict and times of difference of viewpoint. The church even faces times when we are accused of being irrelevant and too small. And yet, we, of the committee, believe that, even in those times, we can realize our vital calling, our vital message for the world, our vital witness to the words of scripture, and our vital love for the people of the church and of the world. And with all of these, the church can be a viable reality in our world today.

Before the ending of this paper, however, we would point out two more qualities of viability and vitality. These qualities also became apparent in the writing of many of our other cultural people. These qualities are the faces of “joy” and “radiance!” We Brethren can be a very serious people, and that is a great thing. However, we are called to give testimony to the joy that we feel in our faith and our love! We are called to give testimony to our radiance in our lives of faith and love! We are called to reach out in radiance and joy! If we can do this, perhaps we can even reverse the decline that concerns us in the church, for who can resist radiance and joy!

When we give ourselves to joy, even in hard times, we are giving voice to the very quality which Jesus said he came to give us. “I came that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete.” (John 15:11-12 NRSV). When we give ourselves to radiance, we are actually looking into the face of God! We are alight with His light! We are filled with His possibilities and hope for the kingdom of God in the world!

In ending this report, we would share the story of a Haitian woman who was observed singing in the street following the terrible earthquake that decimated that country. People were astonished that she was singing, and they asked her, rather pointedly, how it was that she could sing in the midst of such circumstances. Her response were words that we all should follow in our Christian walk. Said she, “I sing because Jesus Christ is still alive. I sing because God is still at work!”

The Vitality and Viability study committee recommends that congregations and districts make use of this report and its resources for a renewal of relationships with our Lord and Savior and with each other.
The study committee also recommends that this report be adopted as the completion of its assignment and that the report and its resources be referred to the Compelling Vision Working Group for its possible use in the Compelling Vision process.

Vitality and Viability Study Committee
Bible Study Appendix

The Bible studies included in the Vitality and Viability Study Committee Report:

No. 1 Isaiah 61:1-9:   Israel’s Jubilee by Steven Schweitzer
No. 2 Jeremiah 32:1-15 Audacious Hope by Carol Scheppard
No. 3 Luke 14:25-35 Cost of Being a Disciple of Jesus by Harold S. Martin
No. 4 John 15 Renewal of Relationships by Erin Matteson
No. 5 Ephesians 2:14-18 Unity in Christ by Alan Stucky

Bible study material is posted online at: www.brethren.org/DMresources

Viability and Vitality Study Committee Bible Study #1
Israel’s Jubilee – Isaiah 61:1-9
Steven Schweitzer

Isaiah 61:1-9 depicts a new world, one radically transformed by the outpouring of God’s Spirit on the prophet. This individual, as a result of the presence of God’s Spirit, is to act in accordance with this mission of hope and restoration, using language common to the Jubilee celebration in the Torah, with the forgiveness of debts and the possibility of a different future for those who were marginalized and oppressed within Israel’s economic system. The prophet is commissioned to “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, proclaiming the year of God’s favor,” bringing judgment, comfort, and rejoicing for those who mourn. These are the righteous who will be planted as oaks, building up the ancient ruins (v.3). They will enjoy the wealth of nations and their descendants will be known among the nations. Why is this the case? It is because they have followed the mission, of proclaiming and acting in accordance with God’s message of liberation and hope, both through word and deed. They have acted in ways that promote Jubilee values, bringing into existence such a vision. Verse 8 states that God loves justice, hating robbery and wrongdoing. God desires justice. So too should God’s people.

This Jubilee passage in Isaiah 61 is directly tied to the legislation in Leviticus 25, which commands the Israelites to observe a Sabbath year every seven years, followed by a special “year of release” in the fiftieth year. During this year, “liberty will be proclaimed” as property is returned to original owners, debts are forgiven, slaves are set free, and farmland will be uncultivated and allowed to remain fallow. The people and the land will experience the full extent of Sabbath. The people are explicitly told to not “cheat” when selling property, as they
must take the time remaining until the next Jubilee into account when setting a purchase price (v.17). The treatment of slaves and their release from indebtedness is linked with Israel’s own experience as slaves in Egypt and in God’s redemptive activity in the Exodus event (vv.38, 42). That the proclamation of Jubilee is to occur on the Day of Atonement (v.9) further connects this celebration with a radical sense of forgiveness and redemption—just as Israel’s sins are forgiven through the sacrifice on that holy day, so they experience economic and social justice on the holy day when Jubilee is proclaimed (v.12).

During Israel’s history, there is no evidence—either textual or archaeological—that Israel ever practiced or implemented the requirements of the Jubilee. No biblical text mentions the practice. In fact, 2 Chronicles 36:21 presents the tragic event of the Exile with the forced removal of the people from the land as a time when the “land kept its Sabbaths” since it had not done so, echoing the language of Leviticus 25. This failure by Israel to keep the Jubilee likely lies behind the eschatological hope in texts like Isaiah 61, which envision a future in which the Jubilee is no longer what could be, but what is.

It is significant, of course, that this passage from Isaiah 61 is read by Jesus in his first sermon, at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, in Luke 4:16-30. He chose this text that day (v.17), when he proclaimed, “today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (v.21). The crowd, at first, responded positively—they were amazed at the gracious words coming from his mouth (v.22). Could it be true? Would they soon experience this vision of a radically different future as their reality? But their affirmation soon turned into a desire to kill him. Why? Jesus went on to say that this grand vision of the future would include Gentiles (his examples of those included in God’s blessing are the Syrian Naaman and the widow of Zarephath, in vv.26-27), those who were Other, who the people thought should be excluded from God’s blessing. Rather, Jesus proclaimed that this Isaianic mission of Jubilee was his own and it would reach expansively to include outsiders. Now, this crowd wanted to throw him off the cliff (vv.28-29). Why? Because this promise of Jubilee was not just for them; this future would be something much more than that, and they were not willing to live into it and all that it would mean for them to do so. They responded out of fear, anger, hatred, refusing to name and to work beyond their own prejudice. They could not envision this possibility, and they refused to join Jesus’ journey to bring it in existence.

The call of Jubilee, this central message in Jesus’ proclamation of the Gospel, is one of justice, release, forgiveness of economic debts, physical healing, and restored relationships. It challenges us, the Church, who continue to carry out Jesus’ mission and follow him, to see and to live out a vision of reality. The Jubilee requires us to imagine a world that operates by different rules and different values, which are consistent with the ethics expressed by Jesus throughout the Gospels, and especially in the vision of the Kingdom of God presented in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

Questions for Reflection

- What are the practical implications for those commanded to implement the values of the Jubilee in ancient Israel? For the debtors? For those who are owed debts?
- What does the Jubilee teach about our attachment to property, economic status, social status, and other markers of “success” in society?
• How is the Jubilee about justice?
• If a central aspect of Jesus’ mission is to bring Jubilee to its fullest extent, how should the Church (local congregations/communities of faith and individuals) continue that mission in practical ways?
• What other New Testament passages affirm the importance of the Jubilee as a value for the Church?

Vitality and Viability Study Committee Bible Study #2
Audacious Hope - Jeremiah 32: 1-15
Carol Scheppard

I. Read Jeremiah 32: 1-15

II. Consider some Commentary

This story of Jeremiah buying the field at Anathoth has got to be one of the most audacious/outlandish stories of hope in all scripture. Even at first glance, the situation is dire. The text tells us that this is the tenth year of Zedekiah of Judah which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had made Zedekiah king ten years earlier, when he ordered King Jehoiachin, the legitimate Davidic heir, to accompany the first deportation of Judeans taken into exile in Babylon. So, we join Jeremiah ten years into the exile among those “left behind” in a severely depleted Jerusalem. Zedekiah has thrown Jeremiah into prison for committing treason and insurrection – for prophesying that Zedekiah would himself fall victim to Babylon. The prediction does not seem all that far-fetched, given that the Babylonian army is at that very moment besieging the city, and is in fact camped on the very piece of land available for Jeremiah’s purchase. Imprisoned by a puppet king in a besieged city, Jeremiah is given the option to purchase a piece of land currently occupied by the Babylonians. At full price. What a deal.

But the significance of this moment goes well beyond the immediate circumstances. Jeremiah’s choice comes at a point in Judean history that constitutes the rock bottom of a narrative that has been cascading for over 600 years. Way back when God’s people first entered this Promised Land, both Moses and Joshua made clear that their success was contingent on remembering who they are and why they are: They are the Chosen of God and the Servant of God. Ten Commandments point to two basic principles: 1) Worship God Alone, 2) Take care of each other.

After the successful reigns of David and Solomon, the United Kingdom divided. The bulk of the tribes grouped together to form the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The smaller southern Kingdom of Judah centered itself on David’s city of Jerusalem and worship in the temple there. The unfolding story of the Divided Kingdom is basically the story of how the people forgot their core identity, chose and chased after other gods, and lost their way.

The more powerful Israel went first. They trusted in their wealth and prosperity seeing it as a sign of God’s favor. They worshiped not God, but their own accomplishments. They not only
neglected the poor and the needy, but heaped abuse upon them. As prophesied, they fell hard, defeated by the powerful Assyrian army and scattered to the four winds.

Tiny Judah surprisingly learned no lessons from the destruction of Israel, and they charted their own course for destruction. Fearing the principalities and powers now breathing down their own neck, Judah sought military alliance with Egypt, trying to pit a super power against another super power to save themselves. And they took confidence in their possession of the Temple in Jerusalem and the proper worship they conducted there. Obviously Israel had taken the wrong position on proper worship and that is why they went under. Jeremiah’s clear warnings aside, Judah trusted in their military alliances and their right worship. Instead of worshipping God alone, they worshipped themselves and their own perceived righteousness.

So, back to Jeremiah in Jerusalem. As we see from the fates of King Jehoiachin and King Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar had an ingenious deportation program that allowed him to keep peace at home and in the far territories. He deliberately took the most essential citizens first – the leaders, the craftsmen, the builders, the bankers, the doctors, the priests – and left those less able behind. Nebuchadnezzar conducted a series of deportations and with each, repeated the same formula. So we find Jeremiah left behind with the losers among the losers. He himself has prophesied that God’s promise rests among the exiled – that the Remnant to return, foretold by Isaiah, would come from Babylon. Those left behind, clinging to a crumbled temple in a devastated land, are not those who hold God’s blessing.

So that is the situation when our story opens.

The offer from Jeremiah’s cousin, to buy the field at Anathoth is completely absurd on two levels. The first we have already discussed – on a strictly practical level, purchasing occupied territory on the outskirts of a soon-to-be-occupied city is nuts. It seems even crazier from a faith perspective. Jeremiah is among the losers of the losers, imprisoned by the loser king. The promise is gone from this place. The prophet Ezekiel sees clearly through a vision that the glory of the Lord, the presence of the God of Israel, has left the temple – this place is now forsaken and the promise rests among the Exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah himself will not see that promise. Historians tell us that he left the city with refugees fleeing its destruction and most likely died among them in Egypt.

But this is not an offer and story about good common sense, or sound investments, or opportunities for personal gain. It’s a story about leadership and responsibility in the context of faith and hope and love. God says, Buy [the] field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin... [for] Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. Jeremiah believes him. Jeremiah acts. God says, buy the land and Jeremiah puts cash on the barrel head. He swallows hard and steps out into the abyss: no net, no security, no false hopes of an 11th hour save, of an oasis just over the horizon. Jeremiah literally puts his money where his mouth is in one audacious act that screams confidence that all God has promised, all Jeremiah has prophesied, is true and will be true to the glory of God. No matter that the most powerful army in the world is camped on this land. No matter than Jeremiah will never live to see the promise realized. No matter that there is not one scrap of evidence that God’s people will ever turn back to God.
Somebody has got to go first. Jeremiah says, “Why not? Give me the paper! I’ll sign on the dotted line! I AM the Chosen of the God and the Servant of God and I WILL follow God blindly and boldly into the great unknown!

III. Questions for Reflection

- Are there ways that our world today resonates with the world of Jeremiah?
  - Like the people of Israel do we feel pressure to worship idols instead of God? What priorities threaten to occupy our hearts and block our service to God and to one another? What “safety nets” might ultimately stand between us and God’s love?
  - Like the people of Judah, are we tempted to pride ourselves on our own righteousness and to turn our backs on God’s grace? How do you see this at work in our world? In our church? Do you see ways we obsess about winning, seeking victory over our rivals? Ways we monitor the speck in our neighbor’s eye rather than addressing the log that obstructs our own vision? How? In what contexts?

- What might be our “Anathoth moments?” – our opportunities to step out in faith, to act in the world with reckless abandon and trust in God?
  - In a world of anxiety and fear, how do we live out our trust and hope in God’s providence?
  - In a world of anger and hostility, how do we live out our commitment to worship God alone and to take care of each other?
  - In a church addressing its own forms of anxiety and hostility, what types of tired logic keep us locked in unhealthy patterns? What are audacious ways we might step out in new directions, proclaiming our faith that God is at work in our church?

Note: This study builds on work that contributed to my Annual Conference sermon, preached Wednesday evening, June 28, 2017.

Vitality and Viability Study Committee Bible Study #3
Harold S. Martin

Jesus told several parables in Luke 14 to teach a number of important lessons. The first parable (14:7-14) is a lesson on humility. The second parable (14:15-24) is an example of the compelling invitation to come to Christ for salvation. The third parable (14:25-35) speaks about the Cost of choosing to become a Disciple of Jesus.

Many want to follow Jesus, but also want to follow personal preferences as well. Jesus used the examples of a farmer who started out with the task of building a tower (a watch-tower in a vineyard), and also of a king going to fight a war without considering the cost—these were given to awaken Jesus' disciples, helping them to see the need for considering the cost of following Him.
Some who followed Jesus wanted to hear His teachings and see His miracles—but Jesus sensed that many followers were insincere and shallow, and so He spoke to the people about the \textit{demanding nature} of discipleship. Those who decide to follow Jesus need \textit{to count the cost} of what it will mean to be a dedicated follower of Jesus.

William Willoughby describes the first official forming of the Brethren in Schwarzenau, Germany in August, 1708—and says that "after singing several hymns and reading the portion from Luke 14 about counting the cost, the anonymous officiant waded into the clear cold water of the Eder (River) with (Alexander) Mack (and was baptized)" (\textit{Counting the Cost: The Life of Alexander Mack}, page 58).

The phrase "does not \textit{hate} father and mother" (Luke 14:26) contains strong words that can refer to a harsh hostile attitude toward others, but here it is used in a comparative sense—meaning that, compared to devotion for Christ, \textit{every other devotion} must become secondary! We are to love Jesus far more than our parents or anyone else. Jesus knows that those who claim loyalty to Him will find that conflict sometimes arises in the home, because those \textit{who will not follow Christ} will sometimes feel threatened by those \textit{who do follow Him}.

In Matthew 10:35-39, Jesus tells about a \textit{family of five people}, in which three young people (a daughter, a son, the son's wife)—are arrayed against two older people (the father and the mother)—all because of differences in response to Christ. The lesson is that \textit{we must never let even close family ties} prevent us from taking a clear stand for Christ. We may not disown Christ, or disobey Him—\textit{even because of opposition from family members}. Children are to love their father and mother, but they are not to love parents \textit{more} than they love Jesus.

To bear (carry) one's "cross" (Luke 14:27) speaks about the reproach and the contempt that will be experienced when we decide \textit{to follow Jesus and live for Him}. There is a stigma that sometimes goes along with being closely identified with Jesus.

The person who starts a project, and does not have the energy or finances to finish, becomes an object of ridicule (verses 28-30). The king planning a military campaign without much forethought (verses 31-32) is an example of a leader who underestimates the strength of his enemy, and must therefore submit to the enemy's terms of peace.

It is important before making significant decisions in life—to sit down first and count the cost, being certain \textit{that we are willing to abandon our lives wholeheartedly to Christ}. If we start out, and then fizzle along the way—onlookers will tend to mock. \textit{To take a vow to follow Christ is an important step. We must not be flippant and insincere in our decision. We are to abandon our lives wholeheartedly to Jesus our Lord and Savior.}

Attending church services on Sunday morning is a cheap and easy work, \textit{but to sincerely follow Jesus day after day} requires much self-denial. True Christianity is an \textit{all-out commitment to Jesus Christ}. The key concept of the passage is \textit{that it costs something to be a Christian}.
There is a genuine form of discipleship which is like "salt" (verses 34-35) that preserves and makes food palatable. There is a false (insincere) form of discipleship *that does nothing* to flavor the message of the gospel. Our discipleship for Jesus is to be dedicated and sincere!!

(Luke 14:25-35) Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it-lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (NKJV).

The early Brethren (and other Anabaptist groups) sacrificed greatly when the first members were illegally baptized. For some, it involved giving up wealth. When coming to America and migrating westward in the new nation, they were often separated from family and friends. *Counting the cost* was important to them--and it should be to us.

**Vitality and Viability Study Committee Bible Study #4**  
**Renewal of Relationships – John 15**  
**Erin Matteson**

**Overview & Context**

The Gospel of John holds a unique place next to the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. It is the gospel likely written last, thought to be completed no later than 100 CE. Upon reading it we discover the recounting of three years of Jesus’ ministry as opposed to one year, three different Passover feasts celebrated (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55) as opposed to one during Jesus’ final days in the Synoptics. Jesus’ ministry in John alternates between Galilee and Jerusalem as opposed to being primarily grounded in Galilee in the Synoptics.1 The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume IX reminds us that “the Gospel of John is characterized by a literary style that interweaves narrative, dialogue, and discourse to create lengthy drama-like scenes (e.g., 4:4-42; 6:1-69; 9:1-10:21; 11:1-44).”2 John 15, specifically our focus for this bible study, is important in that it is part the “centerpiece of Jesus’ teaching” in John, a part of the “Farewell Discourse and Prayer (John 14-17), a speech of unparalleled length compared with any of the gospels.”3 In John’s gospel theologically, the incarnation is central. This is expressed from the beginning with John’s discussion of “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

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3 Ibid, p. 494.
God and the Word was God” (1:1) and “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). John makes clear “Jesus provides access to God in ways never before thought possible, because Jesus’ revelation of God derives from the most intimate relation with God.”4 This becomes particularly relevant as we specifically explore John 15 further, and how the imagery and conversation there intimately link God to Christ to humanity in a link of knowing and being called to love. The authorship of the gospel of John is thought to be anonymous by scholars. Although, “The Gospel According to John appears as the heading of second-century CE manuscripts, likely here referring to John, the son of Zebedee to give apostolic authorship to the gospel then, there was much debate about authorship in the second and third centuries” and no clear evidence proving who actually wrote the text.5

**John 15: An Invitation to the renewal of relationships & a recommitment to our heritage**

To begin, this passage uses the meaningful metaphor of vines, branches, and the vinegrower to speak to the intimate way God, Christ and we as God’s people are all connected in relationship with one another. Charles Cousar, in *Texts for Preaching, A lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV - Year B* reminds us that “the historical character of the imagery must not be lost. The Old Testament is full of texts where Israel is referred to as God’s special vine, often texts of admonition because of Israel’s failure to fulfill its calling. Thus, the imagery carried the notion of corporateness. The command to “abide” in the first instance is directed to the church, whose communal life and ministries of social justice are no more than branches to be tossed into the fire, apart from the indwelling Christ.”6 This is a powerful theological statement and specific calling that makes sense for our Anabaptist/Radical Pietist tradition. The call of John’s gospel and Cousar’s commentary affirm that we are to have a personal relationship with God, to dwell in God as individuals and the church, as preparation to then serve the world. The work of social justice flows and grows out of the commitment to and work of dwelling in God. Abiding in Christ, through any number of practices, including our foundational traditions of prayer, worship and bible study, is critical to be partnered with action or service in the world. Spiritual practices make the soil of faith rich and fertile to be about that work. Jesus immediately makes clear in this passage that the Christ spirit intimately and intricately abides in us, and we are invited and ultimately to abide in Christ (John 15:4-5). Spiritual practices then, help us to get in touch with the Christ that is already in us. We are created to be in connected, interwoven relationship with Christ and one another. And God, the vinegrower, is tending it all. In this sense, Creator and creature are bound together and finely woven to nourish one another and in doing so, become incredibly “green” or fruit bearing for the sake of the larger world. Jesus shares about the intimacy and depth of possibility for healing and goodness in each of us and the larger world so that we may know joy (John 15:11). He lets us know that the way of this intimacy, the way to this joy, the way to healing and wholeness individually and communally, ultimately has to do with love. Love is what God nourishes us with. It is the key holy nutrient for the soil of our lives. Jesus as the greatest revelation of God is focused most prominently on demonstrating that love, so that our lives would be enriched by it, abide in it, making us disciples then, as we discover, embrace, and go to pollinate others with this love. (John 9,10,12)

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5 Ibid, p. 498.
It is because of this holy love that Jesus now calls the disciples friends. His words name the new intimacy of their relationship together. They are no longer servants, but equal partners with Jesus now in this chain of love that began with God and has now moved through Jesus and into the disciples for even further sharing out into the world. Inundated with the Christ spirit, the essence of love, as we abide in that love we become the next incarnation of love in the world. Just as Mary was a vessel of God’s love carrying Jesus and birthing him into the world, and Jesus has been a vessel of God’s love, bringing and birthing it into the lives of His followers, so, too, each generation of Followers is to be that vessel, another example or model bringing that goodness and mercy into the lives of all we meet. It is the ultimate act of service, to bear this fruit, this unconditional love into the lives of others and so spread it further across the globe. A love that is not only for immediate friends, but for strangers and even enemies. A love that is for all. No exception. When it comes to love, there are no “buts” with God. God is Love. Christ has shown and nourished us with this love. To be intimate friends of and with Christ is to be the next generation of Love bearers. It is the sweetest, most filling and satisfying fruit that exists and can be nurtured and shared.

This kind of incarnational understanding of God and Christ, and each of us as carriers and bearers of love fits perfectly with John’s incarnational theology and Brethren heritage and values. All who desire to be in relationship with God the vinegrower, and connected with the vine of Christ as intimate friend, must seek out practices that help one abide in love, for the sake of loving in the fuller Christian community and serving the wider world through birthing practical acts of that love, globally. Abiding in Christ, practicing prayer to discover a love to be shared through practical service, is key path to glorifying God, and healing or saving the world. Through this way of living, John 15 becomes the ultimate way, for the glory of God, and for our neighbors’ good.

Speaking even further to the work of the Vitality and Viability Study Committee with regard to the renewal of relationships, John chapter 15 invites us to recognize that to revitalize and renew relationships - our relationship with God, Christ, others, and ultimately all creation - means to do whatever we need to more deeply abide in Christ. This is the pathway to rediscover the fullness of Love, the call to Love, to experiencing a renewed desire to love, and so the ability to more deeply love through our encounters daily with all creation, both those in the church and persons and pieces beyond it. Discovering prayer practices as individuals and communities of faith that carry us deeper into the heart of God, can lead to coming out with more heart, more Christ-like love to extend into the world in ways that transform, renew, heal, and so bring the kingdom more fully at hand. In a world, particularly in the United States of America, where politics and the corporate world continue to show and grow a lack of respect for and even the dehumanization of each other as human beings, only further encouraging a lack of understanding about or commitment particularly to marginalized groups such as the poor, people of color and women, and where these views and ways of being continue to permeate and erode the character and calling of God’s church, a study of John 15 and recommitment to abide in Christ is critical for the renewal of the church and furthering of God’s way of incarnational love.

Questions for Reflection
• Reflect on your understanding of the connection between the vinegrower, vine and branches. Are there words that describe it for you? Does an image come to mind?
• What does it mean for you as an individual and/or for the church as a community to “abide in Christ”? What practices have you participated in to work at this? Take some time to name practices you know of. Imagine new ones you might create and try.
• How does abiding in Christ, what that can do in us and bring forth from us connect with our Church of the Brethren/Anabaptist Pietist heritage and/or values? What could it mean for places of brokenness in the world between persons, races, ethnicities, genders, humans and other living parts of creation?
• Is a renewed commitment to get in touch with (abide in) Christ’s love necessary for the health of our shared relationships as members together of congregations? For our health as community in the larger denomination? For healing and wholeness across all creation? Why or why not?

There is one main point that Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus is trying to communicate: Through Christ, God is gathering up all things, particularly all people, into a divine unity. Through Christ the great secret of the ages has been revealed, which is that Jews and Gentiles have full access to the Spirit of God and God has blessed them both in every way.

As we read Ephesians from our vantage point in history, which is some 2,000 years after it was originally written, this might not seem like a particularly ground breaking statement. Well, of course, both Jews and Gentiles have access to God! If they didn’t we wouldn’t be sitting here today. It might not seem particularly controversial to say that both Jews and Gentiles have access to God, but in the context of the early church, it’s hard to overstate just how big of a conflict this really was.

As with any Biblical text it’s important to try to understand things like who the original audience was, who the writer was and what the world that they lived in was like. Unfortunately, with Ephesians there is significant debate as to the date it was written, whether Paul or one of his disciples wrote it, and even whether it was written to the church in Ephesus or more broadly to the churches in Asia Minor.

While it’s hard to pin down some of these details what we can say relatively confidently about this letter is that Ephesians is a letter written solidly within the Pauline tradition, fairly late in the first century CE., to a group of Christians in a non-Jewish region of the world, and to a church, or group of churches, that clearly had a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians who were trying to figure out how to be the church together. With this context in mind, it seems natural that one of the central issues that is being addressed in Ephesians is the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and whether or not they are both fully part of the church.

In terms of understanding these particular verses in the larger context it also helps to understand where they fit in the structure of Ephesians. Ephesians can first be broken down into two
sections: chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6. 1-3 are making the point that the secret that was revealed in Jesus was to bring Jews and Gentiles together in keeping with God’s eternal purpose (1:9-10, 2:19, 3:11). Chapters 4-6, then, begin to flesh out what that unity looks like in four different areas of life: in the Church (4:4-16), in the pagan world (4:17-5:20), in the household (4:21-6:9), and in the realms of governments and cosmic powers (6:10-20).

Interestingly, our scripture verses fall in a place in the letter where they can be read as the crux of the main message of the first half of the letter, and thus of the whole letter itself. Thomas R. Yoder Neuflfeld, in his Believers Church Bible Commentary on Ephesians lays out the first three chapters of Ephesians as a Chiasm. It is called a Chiasm because it looks somewhat like the Greek letter Chi (pronounced /kai/), which looks like the English letter X. Most noteworthy here is that a Chiasm is a common Biblical writing structure which mirrors itself at the beginning and end, all leading to a central point in the middle.

A Blessing of God
   B Prayer of Wisdom and Power
      C Gentiles and Jews (You and We) Raised to Life
         D Christ is our peace
            a once strangers and aliens – without God
            b Christ has brought the far and near
            c CHRIST IS OUR PEACE
               b1 Peace to the far and near
               a1 No longer strangers – at home with God
      C1 Gentiles and Jews Reconciled in Christ
         B1 Prayer for Wisdom and Power Resumed
            A1 Doxology

This is all to say that these few verses are the key to the message of the first half of the letter to the Ephesians. The first half of the letter is the key to understanding the main message of the entire letter of Ephesians, a letter which was being written to one of the major groups of Christians in the early church in the midst of one of their most significant conflicts. Perhaps we should pay attention to these verses.

Within these verses there are four major messages that seem worthy of our attention. First is that the work that God has done through Jesus was to bring unity and break down hostility between two groups, specifically the Jews and Gentiles. Looking past the text and asking what the author might be addressing here, we can infer that there was, in fact, real hostility between these two groups. Even 50-60 years after Jesus there was a hostility, as skepticism, a rejection, a prejudice, an outright dislike of each other between Jews and Gentiles. Even within the church, they just didn’t respect each other and didn’t see each other as fully Christian. It’s for this reason that later on in chapter 4 the author tells them that they should, “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” Christ breaking down the wall of hostility between these groups was no small matter.

We might understand this hostility a bit better when we understand just how radical is the second message. Verse 15 begins with, “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances…” We might miss the emotional impact of this today, but to someone born in the Jewish tradition, this was almost blasphemy. From a Jewish mindset the law was not just a list of rules they had to follow. The law was the contract between people and God. God made a promise to care for the people, to provide for them, to protect them and in return they did what God wanted them to do. The law was how they knew what God wanted, it was the very thing that shaped them into the people of God, it was their access to the Spirit of God, and it was their guarantee of God’s favor. Following the law was how humans gained access to God in the first place. And, by the way, circumcision was the sign of that contract between people and God. It was what proved that someone was actually being obedient to God and that they had access to God.

From a Jewish perspective, this is the way it had been for thousands of years. This is the way it worked, period. There was no getting around the law. The law was the path to God, and now you’re telling me that all of a sudden all of these Gentiles get to have access to God too, and that they don’t have to follow any of the rules that we’ve all had to? You’re telling me that Jesus has just thrown out all of the rules that have been in place since Moses and they get to cut in line and don’t even have to be circumcised?! Well…yes, actually. That’s exactly what Paul is saying. To be clear, the second half of Ephesians makes it clear that being made new in Christ means living in a very different way than the world around them. However, those things named later in Ephesians are a far cry from all of the laws laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures. Doing away with the law was both the removal of a giant barrier for the Gentiles, and it was also a worldview-upending change for the Jews.

For people who have had the rules spelled out very clearly for generations, to suddenly say that they no longer apply is a rather disconcerting thing. However, the third thing that our scripture reminds us of is that in place of the Law the early church was given the Holy Spirit. It is striking that in Ephesians this new unity that is made possible through Christ not only breaks down the wall of hostility and does away with the Law, but through Christ “both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

I am reminded of the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 where the evidence of God at work in them was not adherence to the Law, but the evidence of the Holy Spirit. I am also reminded of Galatians 5 where we are told that the evidence, or fruit, of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The reason that the author of Ephesians can say that Jesus abolished the Law and that Jesus brought Jews and Gentiles into unity and equality is because they all now have access to the Holy Spirit which will guide them into the future. It is the Spirit, not the Law, which is the guide. And, it is evidence of the Spirit, not adherence to the Law, which is the test of being a follower of Christ.

Which brings me to the fourth, but most important point to make here: The unity between the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians comes through their mutual following of Christ. It is first the work of Christ on the cross that brings reconciliation between these two groups and puts to death the hostility between them. To be clear, however, in Ephesians unity does not mean uniformity.
It was the Law that demanded uniformity. It is the power of the cross that brings them together and makes them co-heirs in spite of their differences so that, as 3:10 says, “through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety [emphasis added] might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

Unity in Ephesians means that the old rigid rules are abolished, and there is now room for a new array of people and practices which may challenge our old understandings of righteousness. This does not, however, mean that any behavior is suddenly acceptable. Unity means that we all allow the Spirit of God to be our guide. Unity means that we no longer see opposing groups as people to be silenced, but as fellow family members (dare I say “Brethren”) who all have access to that same, one Spirit of God. Unity comes not from uniformity, but rather from our shared renewal in Jesus Christ and our pursuit of following his way of the cross.

**Thought for Today**

In John 17 Jesus prays for the unity of, not only those who believe in him in his day, but those who will come to believe in the future, which means he’s praying for us. In this prayer he says, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” I don’t know what the future of our denomination is, but I know that in order for the watching world to believe that the message we preach is in fact true, we must find a way to come together in unity. Our credibility to preach the Gospel depends on it.

As daunting and difficult of a task as this might seem at times, I thank God that in Ephesians we learn that the work of Jesus on the cross was to reconcile two groups who seemed irreconcilable. Through the power of Jesus Christ the Jews and Gentiles were brought together. They did eventually come to see each other with respect, dignity, and love. Through the power of Christ they were able to see the Spirit at work in each other. Because of the power of God’s reconciling work through Jesus we now have the privilege to be following the same Lord Jesus some 2,000 years later. It is this power that gives me hope for whatever lies ahead.

**Questions for Reflection**

- Who do you identify with most in the early church - The Jews or the Gentiles?
- Is there someone in the church who you would view with hostility in some way? Is there someone who would view you with hostility? What do you need to do to follow Christ’s example and begin to break down the walls of hostility between you?
- Where do you see evidence of the Spirit at work in the church?
- What evidence of the Spirit do you see in those with whom you disagree the most?
- To whom do you need to reach out to in order to repair a broken relationship – in your local church? In your district? In our denomination?

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