UB 3. Creation Care

Origin of the Study

In response to “Query: Continuing the Study of Our Christian Responsibility to Care for God’s Creation,” the 2016 Annual Conference authorized Standing Committee to appoint a Creation Care study committee “to work, in consultation with Brethren Benefit Trust and other relevant organizations, to develop ways to support and extend our knowledge of renewable energy production with our financial investments and involvement in community projects to reduce our contributions to greenhouse gas concentrations and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.”

Query: Continuing the Study of Our Christian Responsibility to Care for God’s Creation

Whereas: two statements issued by the General Board of the Church of the Brethren – “Resolution on Global Warming and Atmospheric Degradation” (1991) and “Resolution on Global Warming/Climate Change” (2001) – calling on staff to give priority to the issue of the earth’s climate and thereby provide models and educational resources for congregations, institutions, and members to study the issues and take responsible actions, have had only modest impact on our congregations, communities, states, and nation;

Whereas: we in the United States are among the nations with the greatest consumption of nonrenewable sources such as fossil fuels, and our own leadership is not responding with sufficient urgency to stem this inevitable crisis for the earth and its people;

Whereas: reductions to greenhouse gas concentrations from our dependence on fossil fuels can occur through socially responsible investments and community projects;

Whereas: there are renewable energy sources and energy efficient methods that do not produce greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide and methane which are contributing to the warming of the earth’s ecosystem;

Whereas: God who created the Earth along with the heavens called it good, and continues to love all of creation – (Genesis 1, Psalm 24, John 3:16-17, Jonah 3:8, 4:11 and others) – God commissioned us to be caretakers of all his earthly creation: plants, animals, seas, skies, and ecological systems, as well as all our neighbors (Genesis 2:15);

Whereas: to value God’s creation, the scriptures teach us we must be mindful of over-consumption, to seek justice for the weak and powerless, reflect God’s light to the world (Leviticus 25; the Book of Ruth; Luke 18:18ff; 12:13-31; Matthew 5-7; and others); and

Whereas: showing care for God’s gift of the earth and its inhabitants may well be a most effective way to bring the Gospel to our neighbors;

Therefore: We, the Polo (IL) Church of the Brethren gathered in Council on May 2, 2015, petition the Annual Conference through the Illinois/Wisconsin District Conference meeting at Peoria, IL, November 6-7, 2015: What can we, the Church of the Brethren through our denomination, districts, and related agencies, do to promote and model creation care? What ways can we support and extend our knowledge of renewable energy production with our financial investments and involvement in community projects to reduce our contributions to greenhouse gas concentrations, and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels?
Action of the Illinois/Wisconsin District Leadership Team: At its August 1, 2015, meeting, the Leadership Team approved the “Query: Continuing the Study of Our Christian Responsibility to Care for God’s Creation” for consideration by the Annual Conference meeting in 2016 at Greensboro, North Carolina.

Amanda Rahn
District Leadership Team Chair
Karol Novak
Acting District Leadership Team Secretary


Dana McNeil
District Moderator
William Williams
District Clerk


The 2016 Annual Conference adopted Standing Committee’s recommendation that a Creation Care study committee be appointed to work, in consultation with Brethren Benefit Trust and other relevant organizations, to develop ways to support and extend our knowledge of renewable energy production with our financial investments and involvement in community projects to reduce our contributions to greenhouse gas concentrations and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. The study committee shall consist of 3 members elected by Standing Committee.

Secretary’s note: In the weeks following Conference, Standing Committee elected the study committee members: Sharon Yohn, Laura Dell-Haro, and Duane Deardorff.

2017 Report of the Creation Care Study Committee

The Creation Care Study Committee first met via online video conference on September 1, 2016. We continued our digital meetings every two weeks, and will continue to do so throughout the course of our study term. After careful examination of our committee’s charge and previous statements and publications,* we felt there was already a comprehensive theological examination of the biblical directive to care for God’s creation and people. We determined that it would be redundant for our committee to write yet another similar statement. Therefore, we resolved to focus our attention on catalyzing action in the individuals and congregations of our denomination that feel called to do this work.

In December, we issued an online survey to better understand what the denominational body would find most relevant and helpful. This survey was publicized in Newsline on December 9, and was emailed to all attendees of the 2016 Annual Conference. Over 450 people responded to the survey, from almost every district. We believe that the breadth of responses represents the
diversity of congregations and individuals in the denomination, and we are grateful for everyone who answered our questions. The results of the survey indicate that the most useful resources that the denomination can provide include specific recommendations, trustworthy information, and consultation from Brethren with expertise.

In January we met in Elgin, and held meetings with Brethren Benefit Trust, Brethren Press, the Conference director, and the denominational offices. We presented our preliminary survey data and brainstormed ways that these agencies and offices could provide long-term creation care resources, with the smallest possible financial investment.

We are optimistic. There are many ways for individuals, congregations and the denomination to meaningfully act on the conviction of caring for God’s earth and people. We plan to provide informational resources, grounded in Brethren values, that will increase the collective efficiency of our energy use and increase our use of renewable energy. We believe this can be done while strengthening our communities and spiritual life.

From the 2017 Annual Conference, we request one more year to complete our work.

Sharon Yohn, chair
Laura Dell-Haro, recorder
Duane Deardorff

* References:
  2001 General Board “Resolution on Global Warming / Climate Change” (http://www.brethren.org/about/statements/)
  1991 General Board “Resolution on Global Warming and Atmospheric Degradation” (http://www.brethren.org/about/statements/)

**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 Creation Care Study Committee**

**Creation Care: Faith into Action**

*The 2016 Annual Conference adopted Standing Committee’s recommendation that a Creation Care study committee be appointed to work, in consultation with Brethren Benefit Trust and other relevant organizations, to develop ways to support and extend our knowledge of renewable energy production with our financial investments and involvement in community projects to reduce our contributions to greenhouse gas concentrations and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.*

**Introduction**
“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)

We are called, as people of God, to care for our sisters and brothers in many ways: by feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and building peace. The Church of the Brethren faithful have a long history of acting on biblical calls like these. When confronted with hunger, poverty, and injustice, we have never been content to simply wring our hands. Instead, agreeing with James (2:26) we grab a shovel or a hammer or a heifer, and we get to work. We write letters, call Congress, and peacefully protest. We scrub our hands, grab a serving spoon, and open a soup kitchen.

While the directive to care for our neighbors is clear, some feel that caring for the rest of God’s creation is a lesser priority. As a study committee, we chose not to revisit this conversation. Instead, we focused closely on the charge given to us by Annual Conference by examining the impact of the use of fossil fuels and contributions to climate change on our brothers and sisters around the world, and how Brethren can take action to reduce that impact.

**Poverty, health, fossil fuels, and climate change**

“*How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*” (1 John 3:17-18)

Climate change is well documented to have the greatest negative effect on people who live in poverty.¹ Climate change also makes it more difficult to escape poverty.²³ Heat waves, floods, droughts, and other events attributed to climate change result in an annual global economic loss of $5 billion from the production of major commodity grains.⁴ People living in poverty spend a larger proportion of their income on food,⁵ and can ill afford the resulting rise in food prices. This concern is a reality even among our own Brethren communities. In 2015, one out of every four children in the areas of our denomination’s West Marva, Southern Ohio, and Missouri-Arkansas Districts was living without adequate food, clothing, and shelter.⁶

Both climate change and the burning of fossil fuels have direct health impacts. This holds especially true for people who are very young, very old, and living in poverty. Tens of thousands of Americans die prematurely each year from respiratory disease and cardiovascular disease due to air pollution. Globally, premature deaths number in the millions. Poor air quality also leads to infant mortality, low birth weights, asthma, and cancer.⁷

The truth of 1 John hangs heavily over the communities around our church buildings. Both the burning of fossil fuels and climate change have the heaviest impact on the people that scripture calls on us to aid, but our collective over-consumption of fossil fuels continues to feed a sinful inequity.
War, peace, and climate change

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

Human-caused climate change is contributing to violent conflict all over the world. While it would be too simplistic to say that climate change causes violent conflict, its effects are widely accepted to contribute to political instability. Rising sea levels and increased frequency and severity of droughts, storms, floods, and wildfires are making vital resources scarcer in many parts of the world. In recent years, these conditions have caused a global crisis of forcibly displaced people (nearly 66 million in 2017). Conflict becomes more likely in these situations, particularly when governments are already weak, wealth inequality is high, and infrastructure for distributing resources is inadequate.

The expansive effects of climate change have been described as “threat multipliers that will aggravate stressors abroad such as poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, and social tensions—conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence.”

On many occasions the Church of the Brethren has stated or reaffirmed its commitment to peace, nonviolence, and reconciliation. As a Living Peace Church, we must come to fully acknowledge the damaging impact of climate change on peacemaking, and the ways climate change impairs our ability to nurture communities of faith.

The Mind of the Spirit: Action

“And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Romans 8:27)

For nearly three decades the Brethren have, in resolutions and statements by Annual Conference and the denominational board, clearly stated the relationship between human suffering, fossil fuel consumption, and climate change (1991 Creation: Called to Care; 1991 Resolution on Global Warming and Atmospheric Degradation; 2000 Resolution on Clean Air Principles; 2001 Resolution on Global Warming/Climate Change). After prayer, study and discernment, this committee determined that reducing dependence on fossil fuels and reducing contribution to greenhouse gas emissions remain a clear part of the Spirit’s urging to act as part of God’s beloved creation by caring for our neighbors and the earth. Therefore, the majority of the committee’s work focused on facilitating that action.

A new path forward

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

Poverty, peace, justice, and climate change are inexorably linked. There can be no hope for justice, no hope for an end to poverty, and no hope for peace if we continue on our present path. We must confront inequality while weaning ourselves from the very fossil fuels that built our
economic wealth. We must work to build peace while reducing air pollution. This new path for us leads to God’s plan for a new creation.

To walk this path, we must first accept that climate change is a moral, spiritual, and human issue, and not a political debate. We must confess our role in the problem and be willing to reflect, pray, and have loving conversations about these complex challenges. We must seek and support solutions that restore dignity to the underprivileged, promote peace, and protect God’s earth.

The remainder of this report outlines our study process and conclusions as the committee discerned how we as Christians can embrace God's call to peace with all creation.

Process, survey, and initial conclusions

The initial work of the committee was to prayerfully spend time with the charge from Annual Conference to determine first steps. The committee spent time reviewing relevant denominational statements, exploring data and published information about the relationship between fossil fuels, climate change, and core Brethren values such as peace and social justice. Through this discernment we concluded that the call to reduce fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions is clearly stated in denominational documents and grounded in sound theology and solid scientific evidence.

This led to the second part of the question: what can be done to encourage action? To further explore this question, the committee took three significant actions: 1) sent out a survey to members of the denomination, 2) met with representatives from the denominational staff, and 3) met with representatives from Brethren Benefit Trust. Below are a summary and initial conclusion from each of these actions.

Survey: An electronic survey was developed to determine what limits individuals and congregations from reducing fossil fuel usage and transitioning to renewable energy, and what resources would help in this transition. The online survey was distributed to people who attended Annual Conference the previous year and was advertised in the Church of the Brethren Newsline. Almost 500 individual responses were received, representing nearly 250 congregations. All districts except Puerto Rico were represented, and congregations of all sizes from less than 50 to more than 300 active members. The committee felt this was a reasonable representation of the denomination.

The top three responses to each question are listed below:

“What limits your ability to reduce your use of fossil fuels and transition to renewable energy?”

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“If the Church of the Brethren could provide resources to help reduce use of fossil fuels and to transition to renewable energy, which of these would be the most helpful?”

Individual and congregation (results were the same):
1. Specific recommendations with guidance on how to implement them
2. Easily accessible information that you can trust
3. List of Brethren members who have expertise in this area and who are willing to consult with your congregation

We also asked what actions congregations have taken in the last five years to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The results indicate that the majority of represented congregations have taken some action, most commonly by increasing energy efficiency.

*Based on the survey, the committee determined that the most useful things to provide to individuals and congregations are reliable information and trusted contacts from within the denomination.*

**Met with representatives from the denominational staff:** The committee spent three days at the Church of the Brethren General Offices in Elgin, Ill., in January 2017. We were able to have meaningful conversations with the general secretary, chief financial officer, publisher of Brethren Press and Communications, and director of the Annual Conference Office. We also communicated via Skype with the director of the Office of Public Witness and the website producer. Conversations focused around actions at the denominational level and the best way to disseminate information.

*Based on these meetings, the committee found that energy efficiency is already a major consideration for denominational facilities and for the choice of Annual Conference venue. The denominational staff are supportive of this work and willing to consider recommendations within the context of limited resources.*

**Met with representatives from Brethren Benefit Trust:** The committee had an informative and wide-ranging conversation with the president of BBT. During this time we learned how BBT screens its investments using Brethren Values Investing principles, and the involvement in shareholder action, and discussed the relative merits of divestment.

*At this time, the committee finds that BBT is taking satisfactory action and does not recommend any policy changes.*

**Denominational forums:** The committee presented the results of the survey and collected comments at two Annual Conference (2017) hearings, and at two sessions during the Bethany Seminary Presidential Forum (March 2017).
**Initial conclusions:** One challenge of the committee’s charge was to prioritize and focus on a few of the many possible actions. The committee determined that the heart of the work would be 1) creating an informational website and 2) forming a Brethren Creation Care Network.

**Outcomes**

**Website:**

A series of resources related to energy efficiency, renewable energy, financial matters (grant opportunities and investment considerations), faith and liturgical resources, and community action have been carefully selected and vetted. With the help of website staff Jan Fischer Bachman, these resources have been made available on the Church of the Brethren website at www.brethren.org/creationcare. The posted resources are from reliable, non-partisan sources that do not conflict with Brethren values.

**Brethren Creation Care Network (BCCN):**

The Office of Public Witness has committed to coordinate a group of volunteers called the Brethren Creation Care Network. This network is envisioned to be similar to, and perhaps linked to, the Mennonite Creation Care Network that has existed since 2006. A committee of six members was established to set goals and execute ministry plans for BCCN. One member of our study committee is initially serving on this committee, and the director of the Office of Public Witness is serving as a permanent member. Terms for the other members will be from one to three years with staggered start times to ensure continuity while allowing members to rotate on and off the committee. This committee will meet virtually (via a video conferencing platform) four times per year. Agenda items may include:

- Serving as a resource to districts, congregations, or individuals who need help taking action with energy related initiatives.
- Submitting articles to Messenger or Newsline to highlight creation care activities.
- Developing a grant program to assist churches with renewable energy projects (solar, wind, geothermal, etc.).

The time required for the director of the Office of Public Witness to be involved with the BCCN is expected to be less than 20 hours per year. Most of the work for the BCCN will be done by volunteers within the network. Approximately 30 individuals have already volunteered to serve as resource partners.

**Recommendations**

Our chosen energy sources touch God’s creation—all people and living things—and therefore should be considered a part of our faith witness. This can be a challenge because there are many steps between action and effect. Choosing a fuel-efficient vehicle may not be as immediately rewarding as working in a soup kitchen, for example, but both help people at risk.
Each Church of the Brethren member is challenged to integrate an understanding about the real cost of fossil fuels and climate change into every part of your life, as an individual, as a member of a congregation, and as a member of the denomination. The committee does not intend that this should become the sole focus of our life and faith, but rather that it becomes one of many considerations when making decisions. We need to acknowledge that burning fossil fuels harms God’s people.

While it is not feasible in our current society to immediately stop using all fossil fuels, here is a simple list of actions that start moving us in that direction. More details and resources can be found on the website www.brethren.org/creationcare.

**Denominational and district levels**

- As technology develops and opportunities change, continue to consider energy efficiency at the denominational offices, the district offices, and other church properties.
- Support congregational and individual actions by supporting the BCCN and disseminating information from this new network and the website.
- Advocate for local, state, and federal action to increase efficiency and use of renewable energy and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, while protecting the most vulnerable.
- Facilitate virtual meetings (held via video conferencing platforms) at the denominational, district, and congregational levels to reduce travel emissions.

**Congregational level**

- Install or purchase renewable energy.
- Host educational community events about topics such as weatherization, renewable energy, or climate change. These events may provide both a useful service and serve as community outreach.
- Take part in community action to increase renewable energy use or increase efficiency (e.g., weatherization).
- Invest in energy efficiency projects for church facilities.
- Advocate for local, state, and federal actions to increase efficiency and use of renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions while protecting the most vulnerable.
- Educate and build awareness in the congregation over the long term.
- Publicize congregational actions to demonstrate that this is a moral and faith issue, not a political debate.
- Consider how congregations’ financial investments impact climate change.

**Individual level**

- Carefully and prayerfully consider energy use and how it may be reduced (insulation, replacing appliances, carpooling, choosing a fuel-efficient car).
- Switch to renewable energy whenever possible.
- Advocate for local, state, and federal actions to increase efficiency and use of renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions while protecting the most vulnerable.
- Choose to live simply. Remember that personal fulfillment doesn’t come from consuming more.
- Consider how individual and family financial investments impact climate change.
Conclusion

As followers of Christ, we are called to care for our neighbors and to act as peacemakers. To continue burning fossil fuels, now that we understand the ramifications, is irreconcilable with this call. Moving to new energy sources is a process that will take time, and it is not the only priority of the church. However, there are many actions that can be taken by individuals and congregations that require minimal financial resources. The committee has developed a website to provide trustworthy information about these actions and created the Brethren Creation Care Network to continue providing support and resources in the future.

Related Church of the Brethren statements

Annual Conference resolutions and statements, available online at www.brethren.org/ac/statements:
- 2006 A Call to Reduce Global Poverty and Hunger
- 2000 Caring for the Poor
- 1996 Nonviolence and Humanitarian Intervention
- 1996 Simple Life
- 1991 Creation: Called to Care
- 1991 Peacemaking: The Calling of God’s People in History
- 1977 Justice and Nonviolence
- 1971 Ecology

Statements and resolutions by the denominational board, available online at www.brethren.org/about/statements:
- 2001 Resolution on Global Warming/Climate Change
- 2000 Resolution on Clean Air Principles
- 1991 Resolution on Global Warming and Atmospheric Degradation
- 1975 Concern on the Use of Energy and Resources
- 1973 Energy Crisis

Creation Care Study Committee
- Sharon Yohn, chair
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7 Perera FP. 2017. Multiple threats to child health from fossil fuel combustion: impacts of air pollution and climate change. Environmental Health Perspectives 125:141–148; http://dx.doi.org/10.1289/EHP299