

5. General Board Recommendation on India Relationships

India Church History: Union and Separation

Members and congregations that arose from Church of the Brethren mission work in India since 1895 joined a process toward church union that formed the Church of North India (CNI) in 1970. The Annual Conference celebrated this union and many thought that this was the way forward for these few congregations in a nation where Christians are a small minority. Within the first few years there was discontent among some Brethren within CNI. By 1978, some members left CNI and a few congregations split over the issue. In time, at least one whole congregation also withdrew.

In 1980 and 1986, queries came to the Annual Conference seeking to re-establish relationships with these India Brethren. In response to the 1980 query, the Annual Conference expressed concern for all involved, and called for prayer, mediation, and reconciliation. In 1986, three queries related to mission and international relationships prompted, among other things, a committee that carefully studied the India issues. This committee brought a thorough report including the following recommendations, which were adopted in 1988:

1. That the Annual Conference instruct the General Board to continue its recognition of the covenant made with the First and Second Districts Church of the Brethren in India, to uphold the formal actions of the District Meetings to amalgamate their separate Trusts with the church of North India, and to transfer relevant church properties to the Church of North India. That we also use our influence to encourage the CNI to permit the sharing of the church buildings and facilities with the separated Brethren until such time as they are able to provide their own.
2. That the General Board continue to support the work of the Church of North India at levels deemed appropriate by the General Board Staff in consultation with the CNI Synod and the Partners in Mission Committee.
3. That the Church of the Brethren tradition of “no force in religion” be upheld in recognizing the right of individuals in India to discontinue membership in the CNI and to regroup themselves as congregations separate and distinct from the CNI.
4. That the Church of the Brethren in the U.S.A. is not in a position to grant the use of the name, “Church of the Brethren in India,” since the Trusts holding this name, through legal actions, voted amalgamation with CNI.

5. That the General Board staff be directed to work with the CNI and the separated Brethren and to find ways to establish meaningful relationships with the separated Brethren. Further, that the General Board staff be directed to encourage cooperation rather than competition in the work of the Kingdom. 1
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6. That we encourage the CNI and the separated Brethren to work seriously and in the Spirit of Christ toward reconciliation and an amicable settlement of their differences. And that if or when both of these parties should request our help in mediating such a reconciliation, that the Conference Officers be empowered to serve in that capacity or to appoint a committee for this task. 7
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7. That the Officers of the Annual Conference be directed to continue to monitor the progress towards resolution of the concerns expressed in the query, which was responsible for the appointment of this Study Committee. 14
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8. That Annual Conference encourage the designation of World Wide Communion Sunday, October 2, 1988, as a day of prayer and fasting in support of healing of the “brokenness” between the CNI and the separated Brethren. 19
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1998 Request for Recognition 24

In October 1999 the General Board formed “a committee to continue the conversation about recognition with the India Brethren, to visit the Indian churches, and to report back to the Board toward a possible proposal for recognition of the Indian church at the Annual Conference in 2001. The committee will consist of a General Board member, the Board’s mission director, a former India missionary, and a member of the Indian community in America.” The request from the India Brethren to be recognized as a part of the global Church of the Brethren had come to the Board in 1998. Because staff-sponsored reconciliation efforts were underway at that point, it was decided to give that process time to progress. 25
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Being aware of decades of conflict between these two groups in India and the contemporary realities of churches being burned in parts of India, including in southern Gujarat State where the India Brethren are located, the committee approached its work as not merely exploring a request but seeking to discern where God was leading the church today. We felt compelled to ask, “Where is God in all this?” In the process of visits and interactions in India, the committee sought to be mindful of historic India relationships with CNI and the on-going effort by Board staff to help the two parties to come together to talk about the issues that divide them. 35
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The committee made an initial visit to the Brethren group in India in March 2000. This was a whirlwind visit of 25 congregations and centers, along with several 44
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1 schools, in just over five days on the ground. In these packed days the committee
2 observed and participated in breaking ground for new buildings, baptizing new
3 members, dedicating babies and buildings, and even planted trees. The commun-
4 ion with feetwashing at Pervad was a highlight, with an estimated 1200 persons
5 present. The committee reported some initial impressions to the Board and to our
6 membership at the 2000 Annual Conference.

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8 Regrettably, CNI pastors in southern Gujarat State who had been invited to meet
9 with us during the visit declined the offer. We were also prevented from meeting in
10 CNI-controlled buildings. Some incidents and angry meetings with CNI leadership
11 and congregations during both visits conveyed the intensity of feeling surrounding
12 CNI-Brethren relationships. While staff had been engaged with CNI leadership on
13 partnership and reconciliation processes for some time, the committee as a whole
14 was also able to meet with CNI leadership during CNI-COB partnership conversa-
15 tions in October 2000. In December, the committee also met with former India
16 mission workers to hear their perspectives on India relationships.

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18 In January 2001 the committee made a second visit to India, including Board chair
19 Mary Jo Flory-Steury and General Secretary Judy Mills Reimer. At CNI's request,
20 this visit began with conversations with Church of North India leadership at New
21 Delhi, where the committee was able to join partnership discussions continuing
22 from the October meeting in Elgin. The group also visited CNI congregations and
23 continued conversations with groups of CNI leaders in Ahmedabad, Baruch, and
24 Ankleshwar. This part of the visit was especially helpful to see and hear more of
25 CNI's point of view.

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27 The second visit with the India Brethren was more focused. The committee had
28 requested less travel and more time in conversation with groups at fewer places in
29 order to gain a fuller understanding of their faith, practices, and concerns. These
30 were rich conversations with groups of women, youth, and elders, that were espe-
31 cially meaningful and valuable to understand at a deeper level this body of believers
32 and its functioning.

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34 This visit included worship at Champavadi, Saraiya, Kikakui, and Karanjvel. A
35 brief stop at Mypur's new church building, completed since the previous visit,
36 reflected solid progress. There was also a groundbreaking for a new pastor's house
37 at Sadanvan, and brief stops at Dolora High School and CB High School-Valsad.
38 The committee also met with trustees of the CBGB trust seeking greater under-
39 standing about property matters. At the Vocational Training College at Ankleshwar
40 the committee observed new student hostel construction made possible through
41 funds generated from the sale of trust-held land.

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43 **The Brethren in India- 2001**

44 The committee found the Brethren in south Gujarat State, who claim some 4300
45 members, to be a community alive in faith and practice. Among its 25 congrega-

tions and centers are places from the missionary era as well as new names— places where the Brethren have reached out to neighboring communities and started new worshipping bodies since their separation from CNI. This group still finds its identity in Church of the Brethren beliefs, ordinances, and church structure— appropriately rooted within Indian culture. Indian-style praise hymns, with vigorous drumming, were observed to be a consistent part of worship.

The Brethren in India are predominantly rural, although some key urban centers like Valsad, Ankleshwar, Vyara, and Surat should be noted. Most members are from the lowest social and economic group in the society. Throughout the last century these marginalized peoples have been especially drawn to the Gospel themes of uplifting the oppressed and to the egalitarian church structure of the Brethren, both of which were articulated and modeled by Brethren missionaries. This style of church functioning is especially appealing to a group that has often been excluded by the larger society. In contrast, the Brethren mission offered them educational opportunities and major voice in shaping the direction of the emerging church.

Among the challenges facing the India Brethren is its relationship with the CNI, which continues to oppose its existence. Preparing and supporting pastoral leadership has been difficult. The small church's existence and ministry within a sometimes-hostile, multi-faith society speaks to the commitment and energy that is present in the group. There are also internal challenges to maintain unity, given the rural-urban, educated-uneducated, and family power issues among the India Brethren, which echo similar questions facing the American church.

CNI and Brethren Viewpoints

Since the relationships in India are complicated by the history of union and separation, the committee sought to hear and understand the viewpoint of Church of North India as well as the India Brethren. While there are still unanswered questions and the committee heard different understandings both in India and in the United States, we have gained significant understanding of both bodies in their own words. The consistent, primary message of CNI is that the US church cannot consider recognition of the India Brethren because of the covenant, or commitment, made during the union process, which they view as binding and irrevocable.

CNI views the separated Brethren as “disaffected CNI members,” and is willing for the Brethren to return to the union if they wish. From this starting point, CNI is offended that the US Brethren would “interfere in an internal matter” among its members in India. The CNI view of the “separated group” is negative. One learning that surprised the committee was that present CNI leadership could not point to any instance where CNI had reached out to these “disaffected members” in an effort to reconcile during more than two decades of separation. At the same time it is important to note that a significant number of former Brethren are comfortable with CNI structure and functioning and remain within the united church.

1 The word “covenant” has rich meaning in the Old Testament, conveying a power-
2 ful, two-way commitment between God and God’s people. There are differing
3 views about the meaning of the covenant made by the six Indian churches who
4 signed the union document, and the linkage to the external “parent bodies” like the
5 Church of the Brethren in the United States. The US Church of the Brethren was
6 not a signer of this agreement, but the paper record and the accounts of mission staff
7 involved at the time affirm that there was organizational ownership in the union
8 process. Yet, if the covenant of union was entered into freely by the India Brethren,
9 it seems fitting that there would be freedom to also choose to disassociate from the
10 union. The committee heard both CNI and the India Brethren assert that the other
11 side had broken the covenant of union.

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13 The committee heard reasonable and seemingly credible perspective from CNI and
14 the India Brethren and found truth in both views. Each party has felt compelled to
15 assert its interests in the courts to protect its rights to property and existence.
16 Actions of CNI blocking access to the ecumenical seminary or publishing the name
17 and work of the Brethren in the ecumenical magazine were understood by CNI to
18 be consistent with its position that the Brethren are not a church. Because of its
19 power and status, these actions by CNI have restricted the Brethren from ecumeni-
20 cal cooperation. As a result, only a small Wesleyan church, also ostracized by the
21 wider church community, recognizes and cooperates with the India Brethren. Being
22 cut off from the wider church in India is a serious loss of pastoral training opportu-
23 nities, Christian education materials, and interpersonal encouragement. All of these
24 actions were viewed by the India Brethren as persecution.

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26 While the views of CNI added important context to the committee’s research, the
27 primary focus for the study committee was the India Brethren who had requested
28 “recognition.” The committee heard from the Brethren that the union did not work
29 for them. Some individuals speak in a confessional way about the separation, while
30 others are angry and blaming. They report examples of heavy-handed bishops and
31 church hierarchy that have alienated them. Since separation they have faced two
32 decades of persecution from CNI. The India Brethren stated clearly and repeated-
33 ly that they have no interest in rejoining CNI. During this period, the perceived
34 rejection by the US church during two prior requests for re-connection has also been
35 painful and disappointing for the India Brethren. A new generation of India
36 Brethren, especially the young people, want to get beyond the fighting with CNI
37 and “be the church.”

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39 The Brethren in India seek to re-establish a relationship with the US church. They
40 view a renewed relationship as necessary to achieve their goal of fully reclaiming
41 their Brethren identity. They also view such validation as helping to resolve many
42 issues of exclusion by Indian Christian bodies and removing barriers to their fully
43 being a church again in their society.

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45 While there is evidence of behaviors that do not reflect well on the Christian com-

munity among both groups, the committee saw evidence of God’s spirit at work among both churches. Since we did not understand our function as choosing one over the other, the committee sought to listen and seek to understand the points of view each presented. This was often difficult because many individuals within each group tended to characterize the other side as evil and not to be trusted. While seeking answers to the questions we needed to explore about the India Brethren, the committee sought to respect and value the relationship of the US church with the Church of North India. The committee’s expectation is that the Church of the Brethren in the United States will continue in partnership with CNI, regardless of the outcome of our research and recommendations.

Changes in Church of the Brethren Mission Approach

Current global church and mission philosophy statements, and accompanying adjustments to church structure, support new mission efforts to establish the Church of the Brethren in other lands. This shift in mission approach came after the last action by the Annual Conference on India relationships and reshapes the discussion on the relationship between the US church and the India Brethren. Specifically, there is a vision for a global Church of the Brethren composed of autonomous national churches that relate to each other and see their primary identity in the Church of the Brethren with roots in the early Schwarzenau Brethren.

For many years after the 1955 mission direction emphasizing “indigenization,” the Church of the Brethren had seen its central role in international mission as supporting existing churches in other nations, or else evangelizing a corner of a nation where the resulting congregations might join with others to form a united national church. The 1989 mission statement continued to support indigenous mission, but also affirmed planting churches outside the United States in the name of the denomination. This has resulted in new mission efforts in the Dominican Republic and Brazil, as well as openness to explore new mission opportunities in other nations.

Gradually, the Conference also saw the need to define the structure of the anticipated global Church of the Brethren and assign functions, resulting in statements passed by the Annual Conference in 1993 and revised in 1998. To encourage and assess new mission proposals from our members, a new entity, the Mission and Ministries Planning Council, was added to denominational structure. In summary, the denomination set a vision for reaching out to the world with new church planting ventures and took steps to form the necessary structures and system to facilitate and guide this outcome.

Where before the 1989 mission statement “mission” meant supporting existing churches, after this shift in mission understanding “mission” also meant establishing the Church of the Brethren in other lands. The committee views this fundamental shift in the understanding of the US church in its role as participants in God’s mission as setting the stage for, and perhaps even encouraging, a broader approach to relationships in India.

1 **Some Historical and Missiological Reflections**

2 Seeking to find footing in the murky waters of this complex history and conflicted
3 present, the committee looked to foundational understandings of Church of the
4 Brethren mission practice. Rooted in New Testament example and building upon
5 mission experience, Brethren mission style has encouraged and honored indigenous
6 voices and local decision making. The humility and self-awareness of US Brethren
7 missionaries about carrying their own cultural “baggage” and, for the most part,
8 seeking not to impose that onto other cultures along with the Gospel message, has
9 been an important value that has defined Brethren mission and often prompted the
10 emergence of strong leaders among our mission churches. Thus decisions to join
11 uniting movements in India and Ecuador were supported, as was a choice for inde-
12 pendence taken by the church in Nigeria. As a result of living out these values, the
13 US church was not, and is not, in control of relationships with international part-
14 ners. Instead, mutual accountabilities in the relationship have been defined thru
15 discussion together.

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17 The desire to live out these faith-centered values in international church relation-
18 ships has implications for next steps in India. The committee concludes that a
19 process that requires autonomous churches in other nations to petition the US
20 church for “recognition” creates unhealthy and unbiblical power dynamics in the
21 relationship. The US church is one of several autonomous national bodies who are
22 becoming the global Church of the Brethren. Procedures that require an
23 autonomous body to gain “approval” from the US church would undermine healthy
24 mutual relationships among these sister churches on the same branch of Christ’s
25 church. While the US church may have been the “mother church” for these
26 Brethren bodies, as they develop their own leadership, legal incorporation, and
27 church system, maturing toward autonomy one might say, they must be viewed as
28 adult children and related to in more equal terms.

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30 These understandings of historic and effective Brethren mission style, culturally-sen-
31 sitive sharing of the Gospel, and the dynamics of healthy church structure prompt-
32 ed the committee to re-frame the question from the India Brethren. Instead of
33 answering a request for “recognition” from the US church, the committee encour-
34 ages inviting both churches to move toward “mutual acknowledgment.” This
35 approach invites both parties to acknowledge each other and to enter into a rela-
36 tionship that will be defined together, preferably in conversation with existing
37 Brethren bodies in other nations. This approach is consistent with relationships
38 being established with other autonomous Brethren churches in Nigeria, Dominican
39 Republic, and eventually the new church in Brazil.

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41 Former India missionaries and Board staff report that during the pre-union period
42 it was believed that a small group of Christians in southern Gujarat State could not
43 survive and sustain themselves without becoming part of a larger Christian body.
44 This perception was identified as an important reason for encouraging the Indian
45 Brethren toward the union, especially after the experience of abrupt, forced evacua-

tion of Brethren missionaries from China in the late 1940s that was very isolating and detrimental for the Chinese churches. Yet the committee found a small group of worshipping Brethren, about half the size of the body that joined the union in 1970, continuing to exist and grow over more than two decades in spite of isolation and religious and societal pressures.

It may be asserted that the direction being proposed by the committee is contrary to some past actions of Annual Conference and General Board. This is a fair critique. Instead of reaffirming past actions that appear to keep the two parties mired in conflict and also oppresses a small band of believers much like the early Brethren, the committee believes another path must be taken. Numerous times in our history the Annual Conference has changed direction as the community of faith sought God's will. The preceding section noting the shift in mission approach from 1955 to 1989 is an example of the Annual Conference sensing a new leading from God's Spirit and striking out in a new direction in perceived obedience. The committee views its recommendations as consistent with the current Brethren mission polity and resting upon core Christian teachings: loving one's neighbor, uplifting the oppressed, encouraging faithful discipleship, peacemaking and reconciliation, servanthood, assistance to those in need, and reaching out to the world with God's message of love.

Recommendations of the General Board Study Committee

We rejoice that the vision for unity that gathered the members and congregations of six denominations, including the congregations arising from the Church of the Brethren mission in India, and which formed the Church of North India (CNI) in 1970, has provided a strong church framework for most of the participants. We also recognize that this framework has not been suitable for many of the former Church of the Brethren members. As a participant in the union process, the US Church of the Brethren mourns the division that has emerged. Over more than three decades the US church has sought to be a partner of the united church seeking to uphold our commitment to this union. We seek forgiveness for instances during this period where either action or inaction by the US church was hurtful or divisive for either body.

We believe that the churches in India have primary responsibility for resolving the issues of name, property, and resolution of the conflicts that plague them. We discourage use of the courts for addressing these matters, both from biblical and practical perspectives. Instead we encourage sincere efforts to resolve these challenges in the spirit of Matthew 18, recognizing that the other party is also seeking to be a faithful part of Christ's church. We are very much aware of the limits of power in the US church to influence either group; in the end each will be accountable before God for its own actions. As a church that helped to birth both groups, the Church of the Brethren in the United States desires the health and well-being of both churches, and encourages all involved to give priority to reconciliation, cooperation, and joint ministry. Even if oneness within a structure has eluded some participants

1 in the union, let us continue to seek and make real our oneness in Christ.

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3 Having acknowledged the essential role for the Indian churches to guide their own
4 futures, the decision before the US church is simply a choice about how to relate to
5 the two churches in India. While the committee understands the reasons for earli-
6 er stances taken by the church to relate solely to CNI, especially in the years imme-
7 diately following the union, we conclude that a fresh approach is more in the spirit
8 of God's leading at this time. We envision an approach that nurtures new relation-
9 ships with both churches.

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11 In its role of overseeing international relationships for the denomination, the
12 General Board is encouraged to begin an intentional process of building a relation-
13 ship with the India Brethren. This will be a time of learning to know each other
14 after three decades of separation. Initial tasks will include defining the relationship
15 and clarifying mutual expectations. Based on preliminary discussions with the India
16 Brethren, the following steps might be components of this relationship-building
17 process:

- 18 - seminars in India on Brethren beliefs and practices, including peace,
- 19 - exchanges and visits for facilitating the interpersonal relationships,
- 20 - discussion of Brethren identity and spiritual formation in our differing
- 21 cultures,
- 22 - participation by India Brethren leaders in US denominational training
- 23 events, perhaps including study at Bethany,
- 24 - visitors to each other's annual meetings, and
- 25 - interactions with representatives of other international Brethren bodies.

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27 The Church of North India has been our partner for more than thirty years. We
28 remain committed to this partnership and desire to strengthen it. In consultation
29 with CNI leadership, we want to explore ways to relate more meaningfully with
30 CNI members as well. Based on our preliminary discussions with CNI leadership,
31 the following steps might be included in strengthening our relationships:

- 32 - exchanges and visits to facilitate interpersonal relationships,
- 33 - discussion of spiritual formation in our differing cultures,
- 34 - seminars and training events in India and the U.S.,
- 35 - visitors to each other's annual meetings, and
- 36 - workcamps.

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38 The US church desires a relationship with two churches in India: the Church of
39 North India and the India Brethren. And, to the extent that our participation is
40 desired, the US church may continue to work with both churches to resolve the dif-
41 ferences that exist surrounding the sharing of buildings and properties, joint mission
42 and witness in their common communities, and the upbuilding of Christ's church
43 in India.

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45 Since it had been two years since the committee's last visit, a committee delegation

traveled to India in January 2003 to renew and update relationships with both the Church of North India and the India Brethren. This committee delegation included General Board member J.D. Glick, replacing former Board member Christy Waltersdorff, and Ernest Thakor. The General Board committee also developed study materials that were sent to every congregation in March 2003 to encourage congregational study and to foster deeper understanding of these issues.

The Global Mission Partnerships office of the General Board continues to sponsor a reconciliation effort among the two groups in India, drawing upon the skills of Bob Gross as mediator. He traveled with the delegation and continued this effort in January-February.

General Board Study Committee:

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