

May Hope Continue to Flourish Among Us
Annual Conference 2019 Compelling Vision Conversation Data Report

In Proverbs 29:18 we are reminded that “Where there is no vision, the people perish, but they that keepeth the law, happy are they” (KJV). In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way: “If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; but when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed.”

It is unsettling to engage in a process when there is no preconceived outcome. It requires faith. This has indeed been a journey of faith as we have sought to open ourselves to God’s call and vision. The Compelling Vision Process was *not* intended or designed to “test”, directly or indirectly, the desire of the body to maintain, change, or establish any particular official position/statement of the Annual Conference. Rather, the intent was to change the focus and tone of our internal discourse, attending to God’s Spirit moving among us, intentionally seeking to identify that which unites us and to discern that which God is calling us to be and do as the body of Christ in these times. Throughout, our work has been shaped by the guiding statement drafted by the Compelling Vision Working Group and affirmed by the Compelling Vision Process Team at the beginning of the process:

Confessing Jesus Christ as Teacher, Redeemer, and Lord, we desire to serve Him by proclaiming, professing, and walking in His way together bringing His peace to our broken world. Join us in reclaiming a new passion for Christ and helping set a course for our future as the Church of the Brethren serving Him in our communities and in the world!

Our commitment to this guiding statement was reaffirmed again and again in the questions we asked at Annual Conference. In either the wording of the actual question or the introduction to the question, we reiterated our call to live as a Christ-centered disciples, engaging in Christ-centered ministry, in a Christ-centered community.

- Thursday morning, we asked questions that helped us begin to dream about the future, to affirm where God is already at work among us as a Christ-centered community, and to help us think about our identity through the lens of our Christ-centered practices and passions.
- Friday morning, we moved into questions designed to help us think more deeply about what it means to be Christ’s community and how we can find ways to live well with each other as followers of Jesus Christ.
- Friday afternoon we invited participants to take a closer look at some of our historical Christ-centered core convictions which had been affirmed in the District conversations—like discipleship formation, peace, and service. The intent was to help us better understand these convictions and how we are called to put them into practice in these times.

- On Saturday morning we moved to questions designed to inspire big dreams about the future of our calling and work together as disciples of Jesus Christ, as well as to help us start to envision what those big ideas could look like in practical and specific terms.

A complete list of the questions we asked is included as an appendix and posted on our website at <http://www.brethren.org/ac/documents/compelling-vision/annual-conference-2019.pdf>.

The use of iPad technology provided by CoVision allowed for everyone's voice to be heard—not just the voices of a few standing in line at microphones—and gave us the opportunity to share an immediate snapshot of the themes emerging in the conversations. By and large, a more thorough analysis of the data, completed by both our consultant, Auxano, and by team members, confirmed our immediate sense of the themes which emerged from the conversations at Annual Conference.

Some **common (as in shared), familiar, and recurring themes** were woven throughout the responses to all the questions:

- a desire to grow in Christlikeness;
- a commitment to love God and our neighbor;
- a commitment to nurture and embody Christian community;
- a commitment to the Bible as the Word of God (although questions of interpretation still linger);
- a commitment to service, not for the sake of service, but as an expression of Christian discipleship;
- a commitment to peace (although interpretation and expression varied);
- gratitude for and a commitment to nurture children and youth in our circle of influence; and
- a desire to nurture and embrace more ethnic diversity within the body.

But also woven throughout were shared and recurring themes that bore witness to the impact of our current struggle in our life together:

- sorrow and lament over our division and a longing for unity; and
- a sense of mistrust (of one another, of leadership, of the structures and process that hold us together) and a desire to restore trust.

These markers of our struggle point to some **lingering questions** which shape our life together in the current context:

- What unites the Church of the Brethren?
- What is the border?
- What is the center?
- How should that be defined?
- How should that be enforced?

- How can the process bring clarity, ease frustration, and facilitate unity?

In posing these questions, Jim Randall and Scott McConnell, the representatives from Auxano, shared the metaphor of a ranch which has a water source at the center and fences marking the boundary. As a church, do we want to be known more by the well or water source that draws us together or by the fences that mark our boundaries? Work needs to be done around this question, some of which is directly relevant to the visioning process and some of which will continue to be addressed on a variety of levels even after the visioning process has concluded.

When asked to **dream about the future** of the Church of the Brethren, participants expressed a genuine desire to see and experience growth and vibrancy in their congregations and in the wider denomination, a desire which was tied to their hope for the younger generations. More specifically, they expressed hope in renewal as a movement that bears witness to our identity as an authentic, Christ-centered, loving, people-focused community of disciples which is sensitive to the world around the church, and actively serving one another and that world. In addition, participants expressed hope in a future marked by the familiar tagline “Continuing the work of Jesus: peacefully, simply, and together”. While it has been suggested repeatedly throughout the process that this tagline could be our vision, in reality, in the absence of a formal mission statement, it has functioned as our mission statement, bearing witness to *what* we as a Christian community are called to do, whereas a vision articulates how and where we are called to embody that work in the near future and with more specificity.

Practices—like love feast, feet washing, believers’ baptism, and anointing, as well as service, peacemaking, simple living, freedom of worship, etc.—are important to us. They speak to our identity in the absence of a creed. Unpacking **what our practices say about who we are** generated rich discussion, affirming our identity as a people committed to living Christlike lives marked by obedience to Jesus’ example and teachings, embodying Christlike love for God and others, and engaging in humble Christlike service, all in an effort to be faithful to the Bible as the Word of God. However, while there is a practical bent to all of this, there was also an acknowledgement that in engaging in our practices, we are also participating in the mystery of Jesus Christ.

These same convictions also form the **core foundations of our understanding of community**: love for God and love for others, a shared commitment to Jesus Christ, and an emphasis on the Bible as the Word of God. Within the context of community, it is important to note that these core foundations are shaped and refined by a strong desire to maintain unity which is characterized by a commitment to relationality, a willingness to engage in dialogue, and a spirit of long-suffering. In particular, in discussing how we live together amid differences, participants articulated the importance of good, thoughtful communication, especially around issues of biblical interpretation. Further, participants indicated a desire for mutual patience, characterized by a willingness to listen and a longing to be heard; however, they simultaneously acknowledged that greater understanding was not likely to sway them to a different point of view.

In conversations about **building and/or restoring trust**, responses echoed previous discussions, articulating a need for communication, forgiveness, humility, integrity, transparency, perspective, persistence, respect, obedience, accountability in relation to Annual Conference statements, honesty, openness, Bible study, grace and more. For some, trust is broken, and they have no further desire to reconcile. For others, restoration of trust will require moving forward with conviction and compassion, but also distinct and discernible changes. For yet others, it will require continued, patient dialogue and the development of relationships.

Participants also unpacked their understanding of the traditional Brethren values of peace, service, and nurturing the journey of discipleship. **Peace** continues to be widely recognized and embraced as a distinctive and significant value; however, participants articulated differences in relation to both definition and execution. For some, peace involves full engagement with those with whom they disagree, while others spoke in more traditional terms of non-resistance. Some articulated their understanding of peace in general terms such as compassion and non-violence; others expressed their understanding in more specific terms related to inner peace (relief from anxiety and chaos), relational peace (relief from abuse and judgement, mediation and conflict resolution, extending forgiveness), spiritual peace (nurturing holiness, freedom from sin, cultivating the fruit of righteous living), or global peace (advocacy, working for justice, and confronting rampant militarism). However, no matter the form, over and over, participants noted that its transforming power lay in its foundation in Jesus Christ and its intentional expression in contrast to the ways of the world. There was a broad desire that the richness and blessings of God's love and peace that passes all understanding be felt and experienced by all. A robust conversation about how the denomination can better equip congregations to nurture **discipleship** affirmed our continued commitment to life-long, holistic, individual and communal discipleship formation in an increasingly diverse world, with a particular emphasis on relational models of formation. Humble and sacrificial **service** in obedience to Jesus Christ, continues to be a distinctive and valued marker for us, especially when it is understood as both an expression of deepening personal discipleship for the one serving *and* as a way to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and invite those being served into a life of Christian discipleship.

Approached within the context of the call to simultaneously grow as faithful disciples and invite and nurture others in the life of discipleship, participants expressed great compassion in relation to the needs of the world. As a body called to express God's unconditional love through humble, Christlike service and intentional, counter-cultural peace, we have **a unique and much needed witness in the midst of the world's needs**. Responses about how we are called to address the world's needs fell in three categories: engaging societal issues through advocacy and training efforts, meeting physical and spiritual needs through hands on service, and providing or partnering with existing support services addressing local issues. A complete transcript of responses related to the question about the next "big idea" to address the world's needs can be found at <https://new.brethren.org/ac/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/08/AC-2019-Next-Big-Idea.pdf>

What will it take to move forward? Participants largely agreed on elements necessary to generate the energy and momentum necessary to move the Church of the Brethren forward toward our desired future. Participants articulated a need for leadership, visionaries, and doers.

They also articulated a desire to invite and involve younger generations into the process (locally and beyond). Further, participants recognized that it will take humility in posture and action, strong and regular communication, and time for healing (from the hurts of the past and the inevitable hurts that will result from the process of moving forward). In addition, even while acknowledging differences in interpretation, participants recognized the shared centrality of Scripture as our rule of faith and practice—as an important foundation for the future. Finally, participants articulated the need for a renewed commitment to Jesus Christ and clear commitment to a shared vision.

Someone once explained hope in this way: “Hope is activated when we say to ourselves, ‘I am willing to trust, to wait without demanding answers, and to contribute myself to the most positive use of the present.’” As we have moved through this time of discernment, we have been called into **a season of hope**, we have been called to trust, to wait, to contribute. This has been and continues to be scary and unsettling, but also energizing. Remember what the apostle Paul tells us about hope in Romans 5: “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” At the outset of the conversations at Annual Conference, we asked participants to tap into this hope by describing a Christ-centered ministry in another Church of the Brethren congregation or the wider body that gives them hope. A complete list of responses to this question can be found at: <https://new.brethren.org/ac/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2019/08/AC-2019-Hope-Giving-Christ-Centered-Ministries.pdf>. However, the conversations that took place at Annual Conference themselves were also a source of hope for many. While we know that the experience at Annual Conference varied from table to table and those at some tables did not have a positive experience, we also heard numerous anecdotal accounts of the ways in which relationships were transformed, trust was built, and unity was discovered in the midst of diversity as people shared their stories and wrestled with tough questions about our future together. These stories affirmed both the conversational nature of the process which encouraged widespread engagement and allowed for everyone’s voice to be heard, including younger voices, *and* the way in which this work was set in the context of worship and Bible study at Annual Conference. Although some qualified their expressions of hope, the vast majority of participants in the conversations at Annual Conference expressed a sense of renewed hope about the future in which God is calling us to engage as a result of this process. Perhaps a quote from one participant expresses the essence of this sense of hope: “Even with great disagreement, we are all passionate about the scriptures and discerning what God wants us to do.” May hope continue to flourish among us as we seek to be faithful to God’s call in Jesus Christ.

Appendix
Annual Conference 2019
Compelling Vision Conversation Questions

Thursday Afternoon

Question 1:

In his sermon at the 1958 Annual Conference, Moderator Desmond Bittinger, said that Alexander Mack, when asked how the Brethren would be known, replied “We wish to be known by the manner of our living.” What Mack actually said was “as their faith is, so shall be their outcome.” However, Bittinger’s version still rings true. Stories throughout our history affirm that we view the manner of our living as a reflection of our faith. As a Christ-centered community, we are still a people who wish to be known by “the manner of our living.” Picture the church in 10 years. When you dream about the church of the future, what do you hope the manner of our living conveys at that time? Just to be clear, we want you to dream about the witness of the future church, not our witness today.

Picture the church in 10 years. When you dream about the church of the future, what do you hope the manner of our living conveys at that time?

Question 2:

Who we are extends beyond our local congregation. Our identity is seen in the ministry of our congregations in the United States and across the world. Each congregation has its own flavor based on the ministry needs of their context. Those individual flavors combine to add to the overall flavor of the Spiritual Gumbo that is the Church of the Brethren. It is important to reflect on what we have noticed about other congregations or shared denominational work that makes us hopeful about the Church of the Brethren. How is God at work in the larger church family?

Describe a Christ-centered ministry you have observed in another Church of the Brethren congregation or in the wider body in the last year that made you more hopeful about our future.

Question 3:

Hands cupping a calloused foot, bread broken across a table, water splashing as a believer rises from baptism, oil lovingly applied to the forehead of one in need – our faith is often expressed through practices like love feast, feetwashing, believers’ baptism, and anointing, as well as in acts of service, peacemaking, simple living, freedom of worship, to name but a few. These practices and acts engage our bodies, both individually and corporately. They are expressions of faith which words fail to fully articulate. In the absence of a formal creed, they speak to who we know ourselves to be in Jesus Christ.

What do our practices convey about our priorities and passions as Christ’s disciples?

Friday Morning

Question 4:

Let’s turn the page and start engaging in conversation around our understanding of community as the body of Christ. At Annual Conference last year, and throughout the district

conversations, we have heard that our identity, rooted in anabaptist and pietist perspectives, is important to us—especially as we see that lived out in the world. Scriptural centeredness and a strong Biblical foundation were specifically named throughout every conversation as perspectives needed for centering a compelling vision. There is a great passion for being Christ-centered in how we deal with ourselves, our communities, our relationships with one another and the world.

What foundations are central/core to forming Christ-centered community? Why? What biblical passages undergird those foundations?

Question 5:

Within the witness of Scripture there is a tension between the need to be of one mind in belief and practice, and to forbear with one another when we are not of one mind.

- In Philippians 2:1-2 we read: “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”
- And in Romans 14:1,10 Paul writes to the church: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”
- And then in Colossians 3:12-13: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

With these directives from God in mind (and perhaps you can think of others) we ask this question:

On matters where there are deep differences around Biblical interpretation, how can we move forward in love and peace as the body of Christ and strengthen the mission of Christ in the world?

QUESTION 6:

In the district conversations, scripture passages on love were frequently cited as key passages in shaping both our communal life and our outreach.

- In Matthew 22:34-40 we read: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and...You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- In John 13:31-35 we read: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
- In John 15:12-17 we read: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”
- In 1 John 4:7-21 we read: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for

fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love...We love because he first loved us...Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

- In 1 Corinthians 13 we read: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”
- In Colossians 3:12-17 we read: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

And yet, sometimes it seems as if we don’t embody Christ’s love in our interactions with one another, especially in the midst of conflict.

In light of these passages, how do we fail to show the love of Christ to those in our body with whom we disagree? Why? How do we better embody Christ’s love in our interactions with one another?

Question 7:

As the district conversations unfolded over the course of the last year, the issue of trust kept coming up. More specifically, we noticed that many of us view each other with a lack of trust or outright suspicion which, at times, creates a hurdle to doing the work of communal discernment. In some cases, this lack of trust is fed by fears and misunderstandings that are not based in reality. In other cases, we have done very real things, intentionally or unintentionally, to erode and betray each other’s trust, failing to act in honesty and good faith with each other. For a compelling vision to take root and bear fruit in us as a body of believers, and not just as individuals, we must find ways for trust to be built where it has not existed and rebuilt where it has been destroyed.

How can we work to restore and build trust among us?

Friday Afternoon

Question 8:

We have asked you some heavy questions. After wrestling with those questions, some of you expressed concern that no vision can succeed unless we address the “elephant in the room”. But as Sister Donita said this morning, it is probably more accurate to say there are “many elephants dancing in the room.” Different people have different ideas about what the elephant is, but we know that for some, the elephants may be stumbling blocks to embracing the vision. So, before we continue the visioning conversation this afternoon, if you have one, we want to give you an opportunity to name your elephant. It is also okay to say you don’t have an elephant or that an elephant won’t keep you from embracing the vision. We want you to answer this question as an individual, we are not asking you to speculate about how others may view the elephant. We will not be discussing this or reporting back on this. Rather, the intent of this question is to inform denominational leadership as they work to identify and address potential barriers to living out the compelling vision in coming years. So, as you pass the iPad around the table to enter your individual responses, the question we put before you is this:

What is YOUR unresolved issue, your “elephant in the room”? (If you don’t have one type “none”.)

Question 9:

During the Pax Romana – that 200 plus year period when Rome imposed peace through its will and might – Jesus approached Jerusalem (the city of peace) and (when he) *saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”* Later that same week as he instructed his disciples one last time, John records these words of Jesus: *I give you peace, the kind of peace that only I can give. It isn’t like the peace that this world can give. So, don’t be worried or afraid.*

What are the characteristics of Christ-centered peace? How are we, as the Church of the Brethren, called to embody and express those characteristics in a hurting world?

Question 10:

What characteristics of Christ’s peace (generated in response to the previous question) are most needed in addressing the challenges facing the world today?

- Love
- Shalom (holistic peace)
- Acknowledging the worth and humanity of each person
- Openness and honesty
- Rejection of violence
- Justice
- Healing and conflict transformation
- Inner Peace
- Humility and Selflessness
- Peace with God

Question 11:

In the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus instructs us to make disciples. Discipleship is about living as followers of Jesus Christ. One of the most important characteristics of being a disciple is to develop an intimate relationship with God through Jesus rather than just learning about Him - it is a head, heart, and spirit connection. It is also a lifelong journey. Disciples are continually equipped through the word of God, teaching, prayer, worship, relationships, encouragement, and service, and in turn, call and equip others for discipleship. Nurturing discipleship is critical to strengthening our congregations.

How can we as a denomination better equip congregations to nurture discipleship?

Question 12:

Service is hot right now. To serve others means that you’re a good person. And we all want to be a good person. It also means that in some way you care about your community and its common good. In President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, he said these historic words, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” He, along with several other public figures both past and present, challenge us to contribute in some

way to the public good. And for the most part, we have accepted that challenge. Now let's look at Jesus. Jesus also challenges us to serve. In fact, He models service for us in the way that He lives among us. In Mark 10:45 Jesus says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus served with purpose. True to His word, Jesus Christ, our Savior, served others even to the point of bending down and washing the dirty feet of His disciples, even the one who betrayed Him. Jesus served with purpose. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages all of us who aim to follow Him: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Hear these words again: "... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Christ-centered service is a clear priority for Brethren. Church, the question before you is this: How should Christ-centered service be different than secular service?

Question 13:

In the district conversations, both the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and the Great Commandments (Matt 22:34-40) were named as key texts that shape our life together and energize our ministry. Both the Commission and the Commandments work together to shape a holistic service ministry—a service ministry to the whole person. In the Commission we offer in service the Bread of Heaven, which glorifies God. In the Commandments we offer in service the bread of the earth, which honors God.

How does the Great Commission shape Christ-centered servant ministry? How does the Great Commandment shape Christ-centered servant ministry? Be specific.

Saturday Morning

Question 14:

As we ended our session yesterday, we discussed how the Great Commission and the Great Commandment together shape Christ-centered service ministry. As those questions focused on the how, this next question puts our hands and feet to the test. It is so important to put the priorities and passions we hold dear into practice, meeting needs on a local, national, and global scale. While the local church, and even districts, have had tremendous impact in meeting specific needs in their local communities, our next question this morning encourages us to look bigger—beyond the abilities, resources, or giftedness of the local congregation to the role our denomination can pursue in order to meet the ever-increasing needs of our world. Our next question reads, Given our gifts and passions, what needs of the world, are we called to address as a denomination? As you think about responding to this question, keep in mind that we are working hard to understand the link between the gifts and passions of the Church of the Brethren and the great need around the world.

Given our gifts and passions, what needs of the world are we called to address as a denomination?

Question 15:

We hope that you have had some rich conversation surrounding the gifts and passions we have as a denomination and how it can engage the needs of this world. We are going to work at focusing our thoughts here by taking a quick poll based on the previous question. Specifically,

on the iPads, there is a list of needs that you all have identified that we are called to address. We would like each person at the table to check the top three needs you personally feel our denomination is called to focus on, and then pass the iPad to others at the table.

Recognizing that when we attend to both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, there is a spiritual component to our response to all of these needs, which three needs are your top priorities?

- Immigration and Refugee Crisis
- Families in Crisis (abuse, neglect, etc.)
- Sex Trafficking and Slavery
- Drug Addiction
- Food Insecurity
- Homelessness
- Criminal Justice Reform/Prison Ministry
- Creation Care
- Adoption and Foster Care
- Community Violence and Polarization

Question 16:

Last year at Annual Conference the Mission & Ministry board report highlighted the fact that we are a not so big church which has a history of big ideas. Now we're asking you to dream: What is the next big idea to address one or more of these needs? We asked this question to the youth here at Annual Conference a couple of days ago and the scale and specificity of their ideas was amazing. They came up with things like growing a forest to supply lumber for Brethren Disaster Ministries building projects. Or starting mental health programs in our communities and districts to address the growing crisis. So, when we ask, what is the next big idea to address the needs of our world, we want you to think at least as big as our youth are. What is the next big idea to address one or more of these needs?

Question 17:

In which big ideas (these or others) would your congregation be most likely to invest? Why and how?

Question 18:

You have done good work together, Holy Spirit driven work. We have had good, honest conversations, listening for the leading of the Spirit through each other about what it looks like to show Christ's love to each other and to this world, about core values and practices that express who we are and how we sense God's call for our denomination going forward into the future. We have sought the wisdom and direction of God through prayer, studying the scriptures, worship, and through each other. We want to reflect on what God has revealed to us through our discernment these last couple of days, but also to imagine what it will take for us to live into the vision that God has been laying on our hearts.

Think back to the first question we asked on Thursday afternoon about how you envision the church in ten years, as well as what we have talked about in our visioning conversations. What will it take for us to become that church?

Question 19:

I recently came across an anonymous quote about hope: “Hope is activated when we say to ourselves, ‘I am willing to trust, to wait without demanding answers, and to contribute myself to the most positive use of the present.’” As we have moved through this time of discernment, we have been called into a season of hope, we have been called to trust, to wait, to contribute. This can be scary and unsettling, but also energizing. Remember what the apostle Paul tells us about hope in Romans 5: “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” What have you heard during the visioning conversation that excites you or gives you hope about our future as the Church of the Brethren?

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