Introduction

Many religious groups have found the biblical designation “brethren” to be so appropriate that they have incorporated it into their denominational designations. Thus, there are Plymouth Brethren, Evangelical United Brethren, Moravian Brethren, River Brethren or Brethren in Christ, and many more. This has made for some serious confusion, however, for there are broad differences in religious belief and practice among those bodies sharing the name “brethren.” Quite distinct from these is the denomination here described.

The Church of the Brethren is the name since 1908 of one of the older denominations in the Free or Believers Church tradition. It was founded in 1708 in Schwarzenau, Germany, by a group of Reformed and Lutheran Pietists who adopted beliefs and practices along Anabaptist lines. Because of severe persecution and economic necessity, virtually the entire movement migrated to North America beginning in 1719.

Known here as the German Baptist Brethren, or colloquially as “Dunkers” or “Dunkards,” the Brethren founded congregations across the nation with heaviest concentration in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and California. The adult membership in 1999 was 138,000 in 1029 congregations and 35 fellowships. These figures do not include members of independent churches in Nigeria, India, and Ecuador once affiliated with the Church of the Brethren.

Although noncreedal from its inception, the Church of the Brethren has always held to the basic tenets of Protestant Christianity. Among the more distinctive practices are the baptism of confessing believers by threefold immersion; the observance of the Last Supper by a service of feetwashing to symbolize servanthood, a fellowship meal to symbolize brotherhood, and the commemorative Eucharist to symbolize Saviorhood; and the anointing of the ill for spiritual and bodily health.

As one of the three “historic peace churches,” along with the Friends and Mennonites, the Brethren have consistently held an official peace witness, often expressed in conscientious objection to military service. During World War II, camps (Civilian Public Service) were maintained for religious objectors who performed work in the national interest, for example, in reforestation and improvement of national lands. Special units were organized as subjects of medical research (semi-starvation and control patients), as attendants in mental hospitals, and as agricultural technicians. During and after the Korean War, many of these programs were continued under the alternative service provisions of Selective Service, and voluntary service abroad was introduced, a forerunner of the Peace Corps.

Also growing out of the peace concern was a worldwide program of relief, reconstruction, and welfare as a service of love to those suffering from war, natural catastrophe, or social disadvantage, under the auspices of the church agency--the Brethren Service Commission.

In 1948 a program of voluntary service was instituted, which provides both young men and women the possibilities of devoting one or two years of their lives to projects of social service at home and abroad. Work with migrant laborers, ghetto dwellers, prison inmates, and minority groups exemplifies the types of activity undertaken within the Brethren Volunteer
Service Program, which also includes a training period. More recently, older volunteers have also been enrolled in the program, quite often after they have reached retirement age.

The Brethren are related to six accredited liberal arts colleges/universities and sponsor one graduate school of theological education. The general offices are located at Elgin, Illinois, as is The Brethren Press; the monthly publication of the Brethren is Messenger. An independent scholarly journal, Brethren Life and Thought, is issued in the interests of the denomination.

In polity, the Brethren combine both congregational and presbyterial practices, with final authority vested in an annual conference of elected delegates. A twenty member council, the General Board, is the highest executive body and employs a staff centered primarily at the general offices. Congregations are organized into districts, twenty-three at present, ordinarily with a full-time executive in each one.

Members of the Church of the Brethren are active in ecumenical relationships from the local level through the National and World Councils of Churches. The European offices are located in the WCC center in Geneva, Switzerland.

There are several major branches of the Brethren, each of which considers itself the direct descendant of the Schwarzenau Brethren: the Old German Baptist Brethren, organized in 1881; the Brethren Church, 1883; the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, 1939; the Dunkard Brethren, 1926; and the Conservative Grace Brethren Churches, International, 1991.

**Resources for Brethren History**

The following books, articles, and theses provide dependable information on various aspects of Brethren belief and heritage. Unless otherwise indicated, the publisher is The Brethren Press (formerly Brethren Publishing House), Elgin, IL, 60120. Many of the older books are out of print. The scholarly journal, Brethren Life and Thought, which regularly carries articles of historical interest, is here abbreviated as BLT. An index of the contents of volumes 1 through 24 (1956-1981) was published in 1983. Subscriptions and requests for back issues may be sent to Bethany Theological Seminary, 615 National Road West, Richmond, IN, 47374. The journal, Old Order Notes, began occasional publication in the summer of 1978. Subscriptions and requests for back issues may be sent to P.O. Box 791, Greenville, OH 45331.

**Encyclopedia**

Bibliographies

Durnbaugh, Donald F., and Shultz, Lawrence W., eds., “A Brethren Bibliography, 1713-1963,” *BLT*, 9 (Winter and Spring 1964): 3-177. This lists nearly 1300 publications by Brethren authors in chronological order. It contains a checklist of Brethren periodicals and an index of authors, editors, and compilers.

Durnbaugh, Donald F., “Supplement and Index to the Brethren Bibliography,” *BLT*, 11 (Spring 1966): 37-64. Included are additions, corrections, and supplementary bibliographical information to the above, along with a topical index covering both the main bibliography and the supplement. Also separately printed.


Related Study:

Source Books


*Related sources:*


*General Histories*


Church of the Brethren, *Two Centuries of the Church of the Brethren* (1908), 398p., illus. Bicentennial addresses by twenty-four authors.


Sappington, Roger E., ed., *Brethren Life and Thought*, 24 (Summer 1979), 131-191. Special issue of papers given at the conference of Brethren historians held at Bridgewater, VA, on April 28-29, 1978. See also *BLT*, 24 (Autumn 1979), 230-239 for additional papers from the meeting.


See also district and congregational histories. (A list of district and area histories is available from the Brethren Historical Library and Archives.)
Minutes


Church of the Brethren, *Revised Minutes of the Annual Meetings...1778-1922* (1922), 266p.

Hartsough, H.L., Miller, J.E., and Garber, Ora W., comps., *Minutes of the Annual Conferences ...1923-1944* (1946), 208p.


Biographies


Flory, John S., *Builders of the Church of the Brethren* (1925), 137p., illus.


See also biographies of individual church leaders.

**Education**


There are many publications dealing with individual Brethren institutions, the names and addresses of which are listed under “Repositories.”

**Literature**


McFadden, Glenn, "Dunkers As Publishers," *Schwarzenau*, 3 (1941) 5-22.

**Liturgy**


Faus, Nancy, and others, eds., *We Gather Together* (1979), x, 236p. A compilation of worship aids.


**Missions**


Royer, Galen B., *Thirty-Three Years of Missions in the Church of the Brethren* (1913), 482p.


**Peace**


**Polity**


**Service**


Morse, Kenneth I., *New Windsor Center* (1979), 104p., illus.

Weiss, Lorell, *Ten Years of Brethren Service* (1952), 30p., illus.

**Sociological Analysis**


**Study Conferences**


The theme for this second assembly was “Faith and Family: Challenges and Commitments.” Edited by Dale R. Stoffer.


**Theology and Belief**


Repositories

Relatively complete collections of Brethren documents, literature, and periodicals may be found in the following places:

Ashland Theological Seminary (Roger E. Darling Memorial Library), Ashland, OH 44805

Bethany Theological Seminary. Library services provided by the Lilly Library, Richmond, IN 47374

Brethren Historical Library and Archives, 1451 Dundee Avenue, Elgin, IL 60120

Bridgewater College (Alexander Mack Memorial Library), Bridgewater, VA 22812

Elizabethtown College (High Library), Elizabethtown, PA 17022

Grace Theological Seminary (Morgan Library), Winona Lake, IN 46590

Juniata College (L.A. Beeghy Library), Huntingdon, PA 16652

Manchester College (Funderburg Library), North Manchester, IN 46962

McPherson College (Miller Library), McPherson, KS 67460

University of La Verne (Elvin and Betty Wilson Library), La Verne, CA 91750

Other Major Collections

Bluffton College, Bluffton, OH 45817

Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1300 Locust St., Philadelphia, PA 19104

Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, 2215 Mill Stream Road, Lancaster, PA 17602

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20013

Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen IN 46526

Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC 27706

Schwenkfelder Library, Pennsburg, PA 18073