

Forward Through The Ages Move The Faithful
James 4:7-8; Romans 12:2; Acts 1:8 and John 14:15

What a tremendous blessing to be living in these days when together we can celebrate the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Church of the Brethren, August 1708 in Schwarzenau, Germany. **To God be the Glory** for this special privilege we all hav

I'm not so much concerned about what God will do for us in the next 100 years. I'm more concerned about **US** being open to God's leading in the future years. How will we respond to God's call to be the church in today's world and with tomorrow's challenges? History tells us and our theology informs us that Matthew 25 which says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, was sick and in prison, etc.. and Matthew 28 which says, "Go ye into all the world, preach, teach, baptize ,make disciples" are the two book ends of the Brethren. Putting it another way, the New Testament commands us to put the Bible under one arm and the chicken under the other so both the spiritual and physical needs will be met. To say it yet another way would be to take the good news of Jesus with the plan of salvation and the pick and the shovel simultaneously. The Brethren are a people of the Book with a servant's heart. When Mortimus Arias, a Latin American theologian, was interviewed as part of the Passing on the Promise emphasis two decades ago, he was asked, "What should the Brethren be doing in the area of evangelism?" "His reply was, "Keep doing what you are doing. I know of no other denomination who has a better balance of word and deed." We struggle with this balance, many times being more comfortable with the witness of deed than the witness of the Word.

So, as part of this 300th celebration, our strategic plan for the future must include several questions: Where have we been? Where do we want to go? And how do we get there? The first question: Where have we been? While the past informs us, it certainly should not possess us. While in another district serving as moderator, I was sent to challenge two small churches to come together, get a pastor and become one strong congregation. They were located one mile apart. The smaller of the two struggling churches told me, "We have a beautiful cemetery here and we must stay." The dead truly dictated their vision. Did you hear of the church that did not want any new members? There were only 4 members of the church still living and the church cemetery had only 4 lots left. So... Too often we are caught looking back to the good ole days as the world slips more and more into the cesspool of greed, violence and hatred. Instead of keeping the gospel rather close to our chests, we must share with courage and enthusiasm the Jesus message of joy, hope and new life.

But, for the moment let's look back in our history and celebrate: **THE BRETHREN MOVED FORWARD WITH VISION AND COURAGE WHEN:** (repeat this bold phrase each time a bullet item is verbalized)

- During Revolutionary War times, the early Brethren refused to take up arms, They were often considered to be traitors. A legend is told that Bro. Mueller (Miller) who refused to take up arms, had a neighbor who supposed Bro. Mueller was a British

sympathizer. So out of revenge, the neighbor burned down Bro. Mueller's barn. The arsonist was brought before Gen. Washington for sentencing at Valley Forge. Mr. Mueller walked and rode horse from Lancaster County all the way to Valley Forge to plead in behalf of the man. Washington was so impressed with Mr. Mueller's forgiveness of the arsonist that he admonished the arsonist and allowed the arsonist to go free.

- As early as 1761, Christopher Sauer attacked the slave trade as evil. Annual Conference rejected the practice slave ownership as early as 1782, but in 1797 Annual Conference declared any slave owner could not be a member of the Church of the Brethren, some 60 years before the actual civil war.
- The Brethren in the late 1880's felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit to practice the Great Commission beyond the American shores, to "go ye" into all the world, so they ventured forth into Denmark, Sweden, China, Nigeria, India, quite a flurry of activity. Today in Nigeria for example, according to Musa Mambula, about 300,000 worship each Sunday in Churches of the Brethren.
- As the war clouds were gathering in the late 1930's, the Brethren like M. R. Zigler, Rufus Bowman and Dan West were busy engaging Gen. Lewis B. Hershey, the representative of the U.S. Selective Service Commission. They were hammering out a conscientious objectors proposal to present to the U.S. government and even got an audience with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. That persistent action witnesses for the CO status even today.
- The Heifer International, CROP, Church World Service, SERRV all were given birth by the Brethren and now are world wide in their ministries and global impact. While CROP is a national movement to alleviate hunger around the world, both Heifer International and Church World Service are in hundreds of countries bringing relief to the suffering and the poor.
- The Cold War era created serious tension with the Soviet Union. During that era, Harold Row and others were building bridges of human understanding between the Church of the Brethren and the Russian Orthodox Church. One of those meetings was held at the Mechanic Grove Church in Quarryville, Pa. It was met with fierce opposition by many government and Christian right leaders. Who knows but that the exchange between the Russian Orthodox and the Church of the Brethren during the Cold War era was a witness of love and peace that contributed to the end of the Cold War! I remember that in the countryside in Russia in 1972, we visited a Russian potato farmer who could not speak English, but did understand that we were from the United States. His only response was to use his fingers and make the peace sign.
- The flood of BVS'ers, sea going cowboys, alternative service workers, all who went to Europe following World War II, to take the love of Jesus and gifts of food and love to our enemies, especially Germany, and to rebuild those countries.
- The Disaster Relief auctions not only net large contributions to disaster victims of the world, but provide very inspirational moments of gift giving and unselfish service to God's special children throughout the world. This coming weekend our district and Southern Pa. join in an auction that will draw some 10,000 persons willing to open their hearts and pocketbooks.

- The litany could go on and on to celebrate our past. Our witness has been a powerful one on the international, national and local community scenes throughout the world. And it was all launched from the Schwarzenau beginnings..

Now to look ahead and explore briefly the trilogy of our 300th anniversary theme: **Surrender to God.... Transformed in Christ... Empowered by the Spirit** –those words in themselves are a powerful challenge with a promising future.

Surrender to God.

James 4: 7 and 8a says,” Submit yourselves to God; resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.” King David of the Old Testament in Psalms 62: 7-8 puts it this way, ”In God is my salvation and my glory, the rock of my strength, and my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times; you people, pour out your heart before Him. God is a refuge for us.”

The call of James is to humble ourselves before God, to surrender to God’s purposes in our world, purposes that touch on the social, cultural, economic issues of the day. Very clearly we have a choice as Moses said to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 30: 19 “I have set before you - life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.”. There is no middle ground. Unconditional surrender is the only way to complete victory. For example:

Any band leader needs musicians who will surrender to his/her baton leadership

The football coach needs all players to surrender to his game plan.

The way to surrender is to humble yourself in the sight of the Lord. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir is world famous. Their pastor is Jim Cymbala. He wrote a book, Fresh Winds, Fresh Fire’ in which he logs his story of surrender. In his own words, he says, **(quote)**”When I came to Brooklyn Tabernacle at age 28, the church numbered twenty people. The situation at first was so depressing I didn’t want to come to services...We struggled to make ends meet. ..After two years I got a cough in my chest I couldn’t shake. For weeks I was spitting up phlegm, unable to go to a doctor because we didn’t have money or health insurance. Finally I went to my in law’s home in Florida to see if the sun and some rest would help me

One day, sitting in a fishing boat, I prayed, “Lord, one book says busses are the key to building a church, another says cell groups meeting in homes are the answer, another releasing demons from people “Lord, what do I do?” Then God spoke to me in the closest thing to an audible voice I’ve ever experienced. The Lord told me that if my wife and I would lead the people to pray and to wait on him, he would take care of every sermon I needed to preach, he would supply all the money I needed, both personally and as a church, and no building we used would be large enough to contain all the people he would send in.” **Unquote** Folks, that was 18 years ago and today he has at least 3 worship services with thousands attending each service and a Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir that is world known. What a present day example of SURRENDER TO GOD.

As evidenced by this Pastor Cymbala's experience, when we surrender our little centers of self-control, we allow God to take charge and miraculous things happen. Is this what Jesus meant when he said, "If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself. . . get out of our centers and we will be fulfilled, we become alive. John Ortberg in his book, "When the Game is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box." declares, "**We actually receive greater power by surrendering..**"

Psalms 62:8 gives us the secret. "Trust in Him at all times, O people. God is a refuge." Because I trust in God, I am able to surrender my need to be in control. We must let go and let God be the first love in our lives.

Transformed in Christ

If there is any chapter in the N. T. Familiar to Brethren, it is **Romans 12. Verse 2 says "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind." Phillip's Translation puts it this way, "Do not let the world squeeze you into its own mold, But let God remold your mind from within."**

The best illustration of transformation comes from Abraham. His first step to transformation was surrender with utter obedience. God said, "Go out" and he went. He left his comfort zone. Abram didn't ask for a map, this fatherless husband didn't ask God how he would become the father of a great nation, he didn't call a committee to figure it out. With unconditional surrender and obedience to the call of God, he became transformed into a spiritual giant that did produce one nation under God.

Transformation comes from the emptying of oneself so that God can fill us full of His plan, his vision , his spirit. Rom 16:7 says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature, behold, the old things are passed away." No baggage to carry, no old wounds to lick, no leftovers—only a new start—transformed in Christ.

Driving down the highway, I saw a huge billboard which read, "God still makes house calls. All you need to do is answer the door."

Bill Murray is the son of the well known Madalyn Murray whose suit against the Baltimore school led to the banning of school prayer. What you may not know is that Bill Murray's home life was also void of the affection and stability that children need for growing up. He learned to hate his mother long before he understood why. In his early thirties he succumbed to alcoholism. In an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, he heard about God. Later when he was desperately alone and empty, he got up in the middle of the night, drove to an all night department store, bought his first Bible. Now in his own words I *quote* "I drove to my apartment and read the book of the Bible written by the great Physician, Luke. There I found my answer—not the book itself, but Jesus Christ. Within Days my life and attitude changed...my hatred began to vanish as the love of Christ took over my being. I no longer intensely hated my mother. Now I really want to love her, whereas before, all I wanted was revenge. I began to see my mother for what she truly was—a sinner just like me." Unquote

If we are to be a transformed people, we need leadership that surrenders self to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, gets out of the way, allows the old to pass and the new life in Christ to be the motivation whereby the problems are understood, the solutions identified, and new life is born and nurtured in the community of faith.

Empowered by the Spirit

A young couple admired the bright, red colored Toyota Pries, longing to go for a test drive...they were given the keys, got into the car, turned the ignition key, but nothing happened—NOTHING! Confused, they got out, lifted up the car hood and to their surprise-no engine; therefore no power. Ridiculous, you say! How do we look to God trying to go it alone?. Listen to Jesus in John 15, “I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man abides in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from eye can do nothing.” Anna Mow was one of my professors at Bethany Theological Seminary. I remember her saying, “ If the Holy Spirit suddenly was taken out of the church, 95% of the activities would continue.” Think about it! Think about it!

Earl Foster, Brooklyn Church of the Brethren pastor, got a call to go to the hospital early Sunday morning to see a parishioner, a victim of a serious accident. His gas gauge needle indicated empty so he pulled into his favorite gas station, yelled to the attendant, “Fill ‘er up!” “I can’t”, the attendant replied,. “Why,” Earl asked, “no gas?” “Yes, plenty of gas but no power.”

Acts 1: 8 says, You shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit shall come upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, etc. Ezekiel 39:29 promises, “I will no longer hide my face from you, for I will pour out my Spirit on you.”

John 14: 15 Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father; and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.’ THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS WHEN WE OBEY THE CALL OF GOD.

We have the power! Do we have the vision worthy of that power? Proverbs 29:18 states clearly, “Where there is no vision, people perish.”

About 350 years ago a shipload of travelers landed on the northeast coast of America. The first year they established a town. The next year they elected a town government. The third year they planned to build a road westward into the wilderness. In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles westward into the wilderness. Who needs to go there anyway?

Here were people who had the vision a few years earlier to see three thousand miles across an ocean and overcome great hardships to get there. But in just a few years, they were not able to see even five miles out of town. **They had lost their pioneering vision.!** With a clear vision of what we can become in Christ both personally and as a

denomination, no ocean of difficulty is too great. Without vision, we rarely move beyond our current boundaries.

Peter Becker in 1719 sailed across the Atlantic with the vision to grow a New Testament church in a new world, now known as the Church of the Brethren. Alexander Mack came likewise in 1729 and John Naas in 1733. Their vision resulted in evangelistic treks to Coventry, to Conestoga in Lancaster County, then across the Susquehanna River and eventually to the west coast of the United States, and on to India, China, Nigeria, the Dominican, and more recently to Haiti and the Sudan.

As we face the future as a denomination, we need to shift our mindsets from being a small church with limited influence to a people of God with potential to change the world. When we think small and negative, we fulfill our own self-declared destinies. We should be a people of God that build around our strengths. What if David, the shepherd boy, would have said, "I can't." Instead he confidently said to the giant, "You come to me with a sword and a spear and a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts." David thought the giant he faced was so big, that with God's help, he couldn't miss. What percentage of Brethren people think about playing to their strengths? Or do we succumb to the negatives of what we wish we could do, but can't **We will grow the most where we are already strong.** We need to build on our strengths. What **unique people is God calling us to be and what ministries is God calling us to do? Can we on the national level, the district level and in our local congregations be more visionary and permission giving without too much concern about bureaucracy? As said earlier, our biggest challenge is to be open to God's Spirit who will lead us into uncharted waters and into the wilderness of potential.**

. As Rick Warren penned, **A GREAT COMMITMENT TO THE GREAT COMMANDMENT AND THE GREAT COMMISSION WILL GROW A GREAT CHURCH!**

Will we hear the call of God and respond?? Are we willing to surrender to God? Will we, through that surrender, be transformed in Christ as a new creation? Can we allow the power of the Holy Spirit to propel us into God's perfect will and purpose for our denomination? Our personal lives? Can we hear? Will we be obedient? Will we? Will we?

Preached by Earl K. Ziegler
On the occasion of the 300th anniversary celebration of the Church of the Brethren
Germantown, Pennsylvania, September 16, 2007 10:00 a.m.