

# HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

by Rhonda Pittman Gingrich

**S**ince the birth of the Church of the Brethren, differing theological perspectives, passionate experiences, and unbelievable opportunities have stretched our faith in Christ and our unity as a church. In those moments of struggle, we have needed to pause, to pray, to study, to reflect, to converse, to attend to the leading of God's Spirit. Our aim has been to seek the mind of Christ, together, to maintain the unity of the body while stepping boldly into the future as Christ's disciples.

Today we find ourselves at a similar juncture.

The 2017 Annual Conference affirmed a report from the Leadership Team and the Council of District Executives on "The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts Regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts."

## What is a word cloud?

**A word cloud is a visual representation** of a body of text or a data set. The more frequently a word appears in the text or data, the larger it appears in the word cloud. It is not a perfect representation because the programs that generate word clouds focus on individual words rather than phrases. Therefore, if a word appears in more than one phrase, the incidences are combined. This also means that the words of a phrase appear separately in a word cloud. Nevertheless, word clouds can still offer a first glimpse into our data and help us identify patterns.

This report recognized the need for the church to find a way forward from the division that has affected our vitality for so many years, concluding with this assertion: "To stay on the journey together, it is also crucial that the church discern the compelling vision that this body of Christ is called to pursue."

This statement was seen as an invitation to trust in God's Spirit and engage in a process to discern what God is calling us to do together. The fervent hope is that our commitment to one another and to serving our God as the body of Christ might be renewed through this shared journey and a sense of shared mission. As Eugene Peterson says in his paraphrase of Proverbs 29:18: "If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; but when they attend to what (God) reveals, they are most blessed."

The church began this journey of intentional discernment and envisioning at last year's Annual Conference. The questions for reflection and conversation were designed to give a snapshot of who we are, what we share, and what we find compelling.

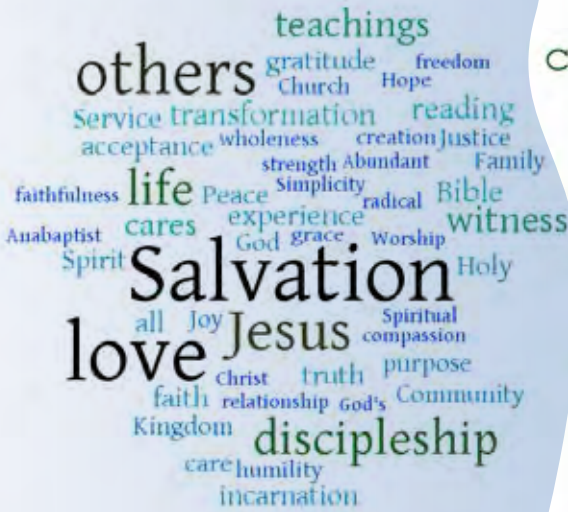
## What compels you to follow Jesus?

This was the first question asked. A similar question (what excites you about following Jesus?) was asked at National Youth Conference and National Young Adult Conference. The process team recorded the responses verbatim and identified keywords that reflected the concepts articulated. Multiple keywords could be selected for each response.

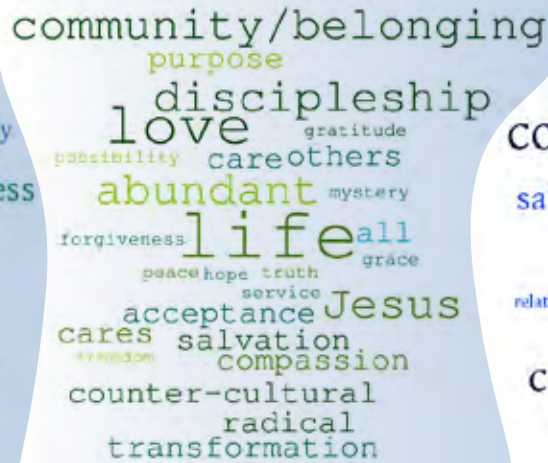
A series of word clouds and lists of the top 10 responses (both created from the keyword analysis) highlight interesting

## Word clouds What compels you to follow Jesus?

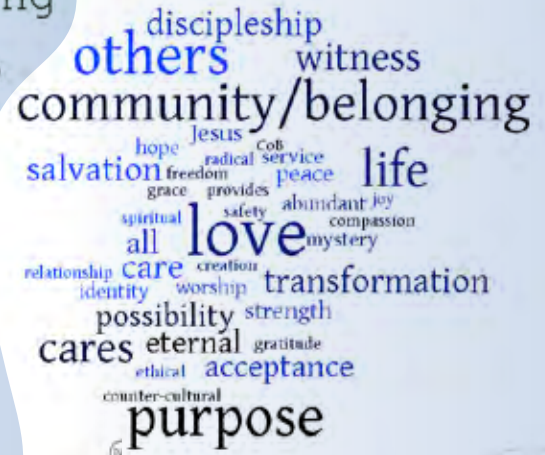
**ANNUAL CONFERENCE**  
all participants



**YOUNG ADULTS** (from both Annual Conference and NYAC)



**YOUTH** (from both Annual Conference and NYC)



differences between younger participants (from Annual Conference and from NYC and NYAC) and the full age range of Annual Conference participants, observations that become clear with a deep dive into the responses.

For young people, the walk of faith is deeply rooted in and shaped by relationship—relationship with God/Jesus and relationships with others (both within and outside their community). The keyword phrase “Jesus’ care for me” was expressed in terms of consistent acceptance and companionship. Further, for young people the walk of faith is less about propositional belief than how God’s love is experienced and expressed in life. This is affirmed by their focus on purpose and transformation as well.

While some of this is consistent with developmental theory—youth and young adults are naturally seeking acceptance and belonging, meaning and purpose, community and relationship—these are also scriptural components of a vibrant life of faith. Recognizing that young people have much to offer us as the present and future body of Christ *and* that the church sometimes falls short in terms of faith formation, two questions merit further reflection: 1) As we seek God’s will for the church as we move into the future, are there aspects of our faith we want to be more intentional about nurturing in our young people? 2) How can the faith of young people inform our understanding of God’s call to us as the body of Christ now and for the future?

## Top 10 responses What compels you to follow Jesus?

**ANNUAL CONFERENCE**  
all participants

1. Salvation
2. Jesus’ love for us
3. Discipleship
4. Jesus’ love for others
5. Life of Jesus
6. Teachings of Jesus
7. Jesus’ care for me
8. The call to witness to others
9. Transformation
10. Bible reading

**YOUNG ADULTS** (from both Annual Conference and NYAC)

1. Jesus’ love for us
2. Community/belonging
3. Discipleship
4. Life of Jesus
5. Transformation
6. God’s acceptance of all/  
Jesus’ love for others
7. Salvation
8. Jesus’ care for me
9. The call to care for others
10. Purpose/countercultural

**YOUTH** (from both Annual Conference and NYC)

1. Jesus’ love for us
2. Community/ belonging
3. Purpose
4. Jesus’ care for me
5. Salvation
6. Discipleship
7. Transformation
8. Witness to others
9. God’s acceptance of all/  
Jesus’ love for others
10. Possibility (adventure)

## What does salvation mean?

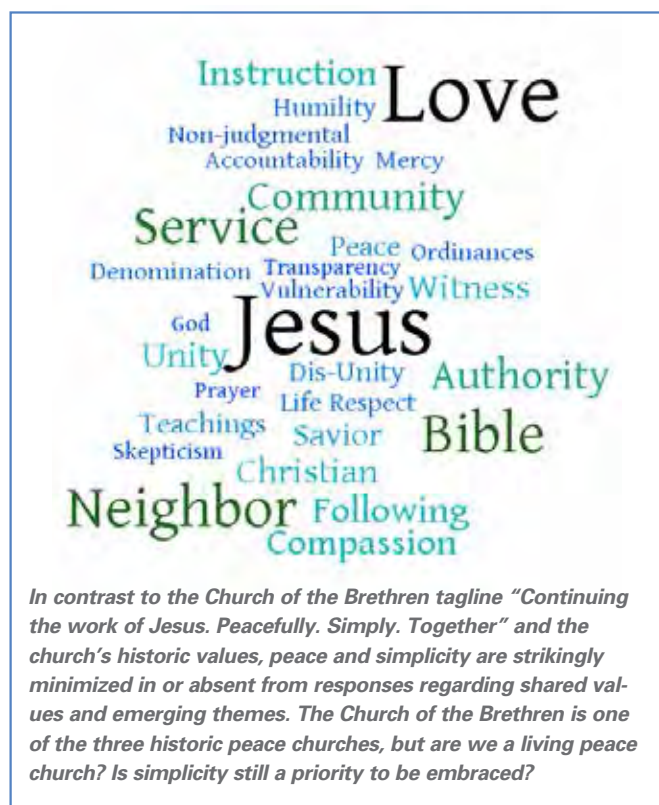
**I**n analyzing the verbatim responses to some questions, we used a set of keywords to help us categorize responses. Among participants at Annual Conference, “salvation” was the top response to this question: What compels you to follow Jesus? However, that keyword was used to capture a variety of language and great breadth and depth of understanding.

Some used the word “salvation,” while others spoke of “unconditional love,” “forgiveness” instead of condemnation, unmerited and abundant “grace and mercy,” “sacrifice,” the promise of “eternal life” and/or the fear of hell, “repentance,” “healing,” “cleansing,” “rescue,” “redemption” particularly in relation to justice, “reconciliation” with God and others, “restoration,” “transformation,” “conversion,” “new creation,” “God’s Shalom,” “the peace that passes all understanding,” “the Way, the Truth, the Life,” the “blessed good news of God’s love demonstrated to a sinner like me.”

For some, salvation was clearly a personal experience, using “me” and “my” language: “Jesus’ love for me,” “Jesus died for me,” Jesus is the “provider of my salvation,” “my Lord,” “my boss.” Others spoke of it in a wider way: “Jesus died for all sinners,” “Jesus’ (overwhelming) love for all people (and all things),” “Jesus’ acceptance/inclusion of all,” “the poor,” “the despised,” “the sinners,” “the outcast,” “the hurting,” “the lost,” “Jesus met anyone where they were and offered what he could.”

For some, the focus was on the afterlife, expressed in terms of both the reward of eternal life and the avoidance of the consequences of hell. For others, salvation was intimately connected to discipleship as people expressed a desire to “live as Christ lived” in an expression of gratitude for God’s gift: “to follow Christ’s example,” to walk in his “ways”/ “footsteps,” “to be obedient to God’s word” to live a life of “service to Jesus,” to “bear witness to/embody God’s love,” to “nurture others in faith,” to “make disciples,” “to reach out in love in an ever-increasing circle to the marginalized of society,” to “live as if His kingdom has come.” In this, they found a sense of calling to work for the kingdom of God in the here and now, a sense of “hope, purpose, and direction” that was “central to daily choices and behavior,” “countercultural,” and “life-giving.”

This diversity suggests the importance of not assuming that any *one* definition of a cherished faith theme is the complete definition. Rather, in community we discover there are multiple layers of biblical meaning related to the foundation stones of life in Jesus. Our compelling vision process models this approach, encouraging us to seek the full counsel of God, in scripture, in community.



### Shared values and emerging themes

When asked to reflect on the values they thought all might share and the themes they heard emerging, participants echoed Christopher Sauer’s motto: “For the glory of God and my neighbor’s good.” Among the top responses regarding shared values were love of/faith in Jesus, love of neighbor, service, compassion, Christian witness, community, authority of the Bible, and peace. Among the top responses regarding emerging themes were love of/following Jesus, love of neighbor, service, compassion, community, Christian witness, and authority/instruction of the Bible.

These responses shaped the conversations currently taking place in districts. Participants have been asked to reflect on 1) the characteristics of a church that is making a difference in people’s lives and in the world; 2) the intersection of the needs in our communities, our passion for outreach, and the scriptures that undergird our mission and outreach; and 3) the blessings and struggles of our life together and the scripture passages that might unite us.

Identifying our priorities and how we better live into those priorities with strength and purpose is an important part of this process. As we continue this journey together, we may need to wrestle with questions around our historic priorities: Are there historic priorities that should be let go? Are there historic priorities with which we should re-engage?

