

TAKE HEART



CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN ANNUAL REPORT OF 2023

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Church of the Brethren

Report of the Church of the Brethren



“Take heart.” – Matthew 14:27

This past year was filled with celebration: 100 years in Nigeria. 300 years in America. Spirited gatherings in Ohio and North Carolina and Illinois and many other places. Even in the more routine parts of the work described here, there was much that was encouraging.

There were also moments that were not so celebrative, when people felt discouraged or diminished. Whether our spirits are joyful or anxious, though, we can *take heart*. When Jesus was about to heal someone, he said, “Take heart.” When the disciples were frightened during the storm, he said, “Take heart.” When he walks beside us, we will find our hearts burning within us.

May this account of the many ministries of the church point us to the Christ whom we follow. With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, may we perceive what is the hope to which he has called us (Ephesians 1:18).

GLOBAL MISSION

The highlight of 2023 was the centennial of **Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria** (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria), which attracted thousands of church members and guests attending more than a dozen events in 13 zones across the country. Attending every celebration were EYN’s top leadership, including president Joel S. Billi, vice president Anthony A. Ndamsai, and general secretary Daniel Y. C. Mbaya.

The theme was “Great Is God’s Faithfulness,” inspired by Deuteronomy 7:9. The date commemorated by EYN as its founding by Church of the Brethren mission workers H. Stover Kulp and Albert Helser is March 17, 1923.

A delegation of US Brethren traveled to Nigeria in March to join the celebration. In the group were Annual Conference moderator Tim McElwee, Global Mission executive director Eric Miller, Service Ministries executive director Roy Winter, and Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford, director of news services and associate editor of *Messenger* magazine. They and six others with Nigeria connections participated in three of the worship celebrations.

Later in the year, Miller hosted guests from EYN who attended Annual Conference, toured the US, and attended the Brethren World Assembly and a celebration

of 300 years of the church in America at Germantown Church of the Brethren. The Global Mission office also hosted guests from Brazil at Annual Conference.

Miller traveled to Burundi to attend a revival celebration of 315 years of the Church of the Brethren and visited Rwanda and South Sudan. The office co-sponsored a FaithX trip to visit the church in Spain.

Global Mission seeks to carry out the great commission for the Church of the Brethren around the world. Unlike many mission organizations that send US missionaries overseas, the Church of the Brethren works primarily with local Brethren in other countries to share the good news of Jesus Christ. The Church of the Brethren in the US learns from their faithful witness while sharing our heritage and blessings with them.

Each in their own way, these churches around the world are striving to follow the Bible and the example of Jesus. They see the Brethren as having been given a special gift and are drawn to the idea of “Continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together.”

In countries filled with Pentecostals, Catholics, mainline Protestants, and independent evangelical churches, these churches find that doing church together in simple ways with humble leadership is

compelling. They all share the gospel in both word and deed, finding ways to lift up communities from poverty into self-sufficiency. Many promote peace in the face of great violence.

The Church of the Brethren maintains a mission in South Sudan and pays a US-based missionary, Athanasus Ungang, as well as local staff and programs that work to provide hope in the world's newest country and speak peace in a nation torn by war. In 2023, the first two Churches of the Brethren were planted in South Sudan.

Carole Davenport began as office manager in early 2023. In addition to handling administrative functions of the office, she plays an important role in communicating the work of Global Mission to the church through an emailed prayer list and social media.

The budget supports the building of relationships with churches around the world through travel and face-to-face meetings, and provides annual financial support to many of the national churches. The office also supports BVS volunteer Grace Elliot and mission worker Chris Elliot in Rwanda.

Global Mission works with churches around the world to identify areas of need. Staff collect and transfer funds to pay for some of the most pressing needs and ensure that funded projects are carried out. This funding supports evangelistic meetings, annual conferences, church building, theological training, and other projects. Global Mission also handles funds for the Haiti Medical Project, a development project of the Haiti Church of the Brethren. In 2023, grants totaled \$618,696.

Global Church of the Brethren Communion

The Global Church of the Brethren Communion

is a partnership of equals. In 2023, participating countries approved bylaws and in December formally met online for the first constitutive assembly to launch the group. At that meeting, the Honduras Church of the Brethren was welcomed as a founding member, bringing the number of member churches to 12. The countries represented are Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, India, Nigeria, Rwanda, Spain, Uganda, the US, and Venezuela.

The communion elected Joel S. Billi of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria as moderator, Darryl Sankey of First District Church of the Brethren in India as vice moderator, Eric Miller of the Church of the Brethren in the US as treasurer, and Alexandre Gonçalves of the Church of the Brethren in Brazil as secretary. Board members elected were Oswaldo Lezama of the Church of the Brethren in Venezuela and Etienne Nsanzimana of the Church of the Brethren in Rwanda.

Global Food Initiative

In 1983, Church of the Brethren leaders came together

to form what is now the Global Food Initiative. That fund was established to provide congregations and individuals an avenue to give toward famine relief in Africa. Forty years later, the focus of the fund has shifted away from supporting relief efforts and toward encouraging agricultural development projects, but Brethren members have not changed in their desire to make a dent in hunger and poverty both near and far.

Total income to the Global Food Initiative Fund in 2023 was \$262,381. The sum of all funds given as grants to both international and domestic partners was \$137,578.

International grants supported agricultural development work in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Nigeria, Spain, South Sudan, Uganda, and Venezuela. Projects included animal raising, tree planting, soil conservation, drip-irrigation workshops, and training on vegetable and staple crop production. International allocations totaled \$114,703.

In the US, grants were given to churches and partner organizations in Alaska, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. These grants are connected primarily to church-based community gardens. Total allocations of domestic grants equaled \$22,875.

The Global Food Initiative supports advocacy work on food sovereignty through yearly contributions to Bread for the World, Growing Hope Globally, and the National Farm Worker Ministry, with contributions tallying \$7,500.

GFI manager Jeff Boshart left the position at the end of the year, after serving more than 11 years.

SERVICE MINISTRIES

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8).

Martie Hummer and 894 other volunteers heard God’s call to serve in 2023. Hummer fulfilled a lifelong goal when she joined Brethren Volunteer Service and served as a long-term Rebuilding Program volunteer with Brethren Disaster Ministries. “BVS is an experience I will always treasure,” she reflected, “and I would recommend it to both the young and the more mature alike. You are never too old to serve.”

For the first time since 2019, all the volunteer programs provided regular programming without significant COVID-19 modifications. The number of volunteers continues to be significantly lower than pre-pandemic, however, resulting in a focus on calling more volunteers to serve.

The programs of Service Ministries equip and send volunteers, resources, and material aid to demonstrate God’s love and hope for people around the globe. Roy Winter is executive director.

Brethren Disaster Ministries

Brethren Disaster Ministries facilitates and leads the Church of the Brethren response to disasters and crises around the globe by working with volunteers, congregations, districts, the global church, and partners. Tornadoes and floods in the US, a devastating typhoon and a wildfire in the Pacific islands, an earthquake on the border of Turkey and Syria, and continued violence in Ukraine, Africa, and Haiti challenged BDM to walk with families through very difficult times.

When responding to the call to serve, BDM volunteers sometime experience unforeseen insights during experience. Volunteers from the Kentucky rebuilding sites said:

“An unexpected experience was the overwhelming presence of the Spirit of God. I expected the experience

to be faith based, but it was an amazing week for me.”

“I came home with my cup running over. What an experience. I am ready to go again.”

Calling out new volunteer leadership has been less successful and continues to limit the program’s scope.

Brethren Disaster Ministries is coordinated by Roy Winter, with administrative support from office manager Sharon Franzén. Darlene Hylton provides part-time database support.

Rebuilding Program

Volunteers from the Rebuilding Program

spent most of their time serving in multiple areas of Kentucky, supporting 2021 tornado rebuilding and 2022 flood recovery. BDM director Jenn Dorsch-Messler and program assistant Kim Gingerich provided staff support and coordination.

Partner Habitat for Humanity of Habitat’s Pennyriple Region identified work and provided a location for volunteer housing. The housing site in Madisonville, Ky., was the base for BDM volunteers to support the rebuilding of nearby Dawson Springs, where 75 percent of the buildings in the town were destroyed by tornadoes in December 2021. Volunteers supported the construction of new Habitat houses for qualified first-time homeowners whose previous rental properties were lost in the storm. Leadership was provided by long-term volunteers Lynn Evans and Steve Keim.

For two weeks in April and 10 weeks in the fall, volunteers repaired flood-damaged homes in Breathitt County of eastern Kentucky. Some homes belonged to families who have owned their properties for generations, dating back to the late 1700s. This ministry was accomplished by partnering with the Eastern Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church Disaster Response.

Brethren Volunteer Service volunteers Martie Hummer and Benjamin Hoffmann engaged in service with BDM. Hummer supported the household leadership on the Dawson Springs project and Hoffmann spent several weeks in the fall gathering photo and video content on both Kentucky sites.

At these two sites, 647 weekly volunteers and 61 project leaders gave 39,144 hours of service. This enabled savings of \$1,244,779 to the community and the 52 families who received assistance.

With support from the BDM office, district-level responses included volunteers that served Camp Fire survivors in Paradise, Calif.; families affected by tidal flooding in Somerset County, Md.; members of the Point-aux-Chein Tribe hit by Hurricane Ida in Louisiana; and residents around Detroit, Mich., who needed their basements cleaned and repaired.

In May, BDM hosted 38 disaster project leaders and district disaster coordinators at Camp Blue Diamond in Middle Pennsylvania District for fellowship, training, and program development discussions. Following these conversations, two older vehicles were replaced with 2021 hybrid trucks to be used daily on the project sites.

Children's Disaster Services

Two major disasters in the Pacific islands created challenging responses for Children's Disaster Services soon after new associate director Carolyn Neher started on June 1. After Typhoon Mawar passed over Guam on May 24, a team of six volunteers served on the island for three weeks, receiving 563 children into their care center. In August and September three teams, totaling 13 volunteers, responded to the devastating wildfire in Lahaina on the Hawaiian island of Maui where nearly 100 people lost their lives. The teams made 457 child contacts while serving families over this six-week response.

These are just two of nine CDS responses during a year that also included an apartment fire, a home explosion, tornadoes, and support for asylum seekers. CDS also sent a team of five Critical Response Childcare (CRC) volunteers in October to Lewiston, Maine, after a mass shooting there. CRC volunteers receive additional specialized training for supporting traumatized families and children. A total of 44 CDS volunteers served 1,185 child contacts in 2023.

Six entry-level volunteer training workshops were held in 2023, resulting in 71 newly trained potential volunteers. Nine people participated in an online course to train trainers. The CDS program was led by associate director Lisa Crouch until her resignation in March. Carolyn Neher began in June. Michael Scalzi is program assistant.

International Response

Effective response to war, conflict, civil unrest, and terrorist violence is an incredible challenge. These were the most pressing issues of the year, resulting in support of relief and recovery programing totaling \$659,700 in Emergency Disaster Fund grants. While \$220,000 supported Ukrainian people displaced by the war, the majority of this support was for conflicts in the countries and communities of the Global Church of the Brethren family. This includes the Democratic Republic of Congo (\$94,500), Haiti (\$60,200), South Sudan (\$40,000), and the Nigeria Crisis Response (\$220,000).

In Haiti, a dual program continued the 2021 earthquake response, with \$109,824 in funds, while also addressing the acute overlapping humanitarian crisis caused by the total collapse of the Haitian government. These programs were accomplished in partnership with L'Eglise des Freres d'Haiti (the Church of the Brethren in Haiti).

A massive earthquake on Feb. 6, near the southern border of Turkey and the northwestern border of Syria, caused extensive damage, affecting the lives of over 15 million and killing 59,259 people. Donor support has been limited, but \$100,000 in EDF grants supported partners in Turkey and churches and their communities in Syria.

Smaller grants supported flood recovery and a feeding program in Rwanda (\$34,100), storm recovery in Mexico (\$6,300), and continued hurricane and flood recovery in Honduras.

Nigeria Crisis Response

The ongoing violence in Nigeria did not prevent Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) from celebrating the 100th anniversary of the church's founding. Regional celebrations provided encouragement to a church still rebuilding from years of violence as well as enduring new attacks occurring almost weekly.

Since 2014, the Church of the Brethren has partnered with and supported EYN through the Nigeria Crisis Response, a program responding to the violence by the terrorist group Boko Haram and, more recently, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). BDM is helping lead an extensive program that includes sponsorship of four camps for internally displaced persons, food distributions, medical assistance,

livelihood training centers for widows and orphans, distribution of seeds and fertilizer, new wells for drinking water, education assistance for orphan children, trauma workshops, and home repairs for the most vulnerable. Through grants of \$220,000 in 2023, this ministry has provided significant recovery and relief in areas where EYN churches, families, and communities are rebuilding.

In the last few years lawlessness has spread beyond northeast Nigeria, making recovery difficult and causing the displacement of some families for a second or third time. Working together, and with faith in God, EYN continues to persevere and lead recovery and relief efforts while also planting new churches.

Financial details

Donations to BDM, CDS, the Nigeria Crisis Fund, and the Emergency Disaster Fund totaled \$1,884,770 in 2023. This giving provided for all BDM expenses, including staff, programs, and allocations for disaster response. Expenditures included a total of \$145,314 for US responses (including Home Rebuilding and CDS) and \$919,171 for international responses, with \$542,871 of these responses accomplished in partnership with Global Church of the Brethren groups.

Brethren Volunteer Service

Brethren Volunteer Service continued its widespread ministry of “sharing God’s love through acts of service” with volunteers who use their talents at projects that serve human need, advocate justice, work for peace, and care for creation. This past year marked the 75th anniversary of that work, an occasion marked by a variety of celebrations and special events. These included a book by author and historian James H. Lehman, *A Year of Living Differently*, published by Brethren Press, as well as commemorations at Annual Conference, several special workshops and district gatherings, and an online Facebook group for sharing memories.

BVS welcomed 22 volunteers to two orientations in 2023, one held in the summer at Inspiration Hills in Ohio and the other in the fall at Camp Koinonia in Washington. Various guest leaders led training sessions, mostly via virtual presentations. In all, 50 volunteers served over the course of the year, in the US, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Several new project

sites were added. Recruitment and communication enhancements included a regular email newsletter, new electronic project files, development of a new brochure, and a wider social media outreach.

New staff included Walt Wiltschek, who began as part-time office coordinator in March, and Virginia Rendler, who joined the staff as volunteer coordinator in July after completing a term of BVS service in Northern Ireland. Rendler is working remotely from North Manchester, Ind. Chelsea Goss Skillen completed her first full year as BVS director, while Sara Cook continues as part-time Europe coordinator to facilitate placements and support for volunteers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Faith Outreach Expeditions (FaithX)

FaithX’s theme of “Voices for Peace,” based on Romans 15:1-6, encouraged participants to consider how God calls them to use their distinct voices and skills in service and advocacy to their communities. The summer schedule marked the first full lineup of FaithX service trips for junior high, senior high, and adults since pre-pandemic years. Twelve week-long trips were scheduled in the United States and in Spain, with 172 youth and adult participants.

In the United States, FaithX participants volunteered with more than 15 organizations, including Church of the Brethren camps, assistance programs for the unhoused and under-resourced, and peace and justice advocacy groups. Youth reflections on what they learned include:

- “You shouldn’t judge a person, especially before hearing their story.”
- “There are people in the world who go through so much, yet receive so little.”
- “There are a lot more things that we can do to help than we think.”

In Spain, FaithX participants focused on relationship-building and intercultural education with members of Iglesia Evangélica Una Luz en las Naciones (Light to the Nations Church of the Brethren), the mother church of Spain’s five official Brethren congregations. Marianne Fitzkee, co-leader and interpreter for the trip, shared, “It was beautiful to see relationships grow at tables during late-night dinners and raucous rounds of the game Spoons and in the church sanctuary.”

The 2023 FaithX program was organized by Marissa

Witkovsky-Eldred, who was promoted from an interim role to coordinator of short-term service in September.

Material Resources

Material Resources staff facilitated 148 shipments totaling 774 tons of hospital supplies, quilts, kits (health, school, baby, and cleanup), and other supplies valued at \$8.9 million, reaching 23 states and 21 countries. Material Resources also baled 34.8 tons of cardboard for recycling.

Loretta Wolf directed the program, while Scott Senseney and Glenna Thompson coordinated warehouse and office operations. Warehouse staff Richard Best, Melissa Fritz, and Brenda Giles packed items for shipping. Ed Palsgrove drove 23,798 miles delivering shipments and picking up donations. Medical supplies were sorted and prepared for shipment by Winni Wanionek, Jeffrey Brown, and Sam Carter.

Staff welcomed 130 volunteers during the fall to assist with quality control and packing of hygiene kits.

Due to continued low levels of kit donations, this was significantly fewer volunteers than before the pandemic. Donations received for Lutheran World Relief and Church World Service in 2023 were down 280,000 pounds from 2022.

On behalf of Church World Service, Material Resources sent kits and/or blankets in response to Hurricane Idalia and continued needs from 2022's Hurricane Ian. CWS and International Orthodox Christian Charities cooperated to ship supplies to Armenia, Moldova, the Republic of Georgia, and Romania. Lutheran World Relief and IOCC jointly sent aid to Jordan.

LWR shipments sailed to Ecuador, Liberia, Republic of Congo, Ukraine, and Zambia, and 10 40-foot shipping containers went to Turkey. For Brothers Brother Foundation, donations of hospital supplies shipped to Dominican Republic, Ghana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kenya, Malawi, Philippines, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. The Church of the Brethren sent one 20-foot container to Honduras, which included BBF medical items and CWS blankets and hygiene kits.

DISCIPLESHIP AND LEADERSHIP FORMATION

Discipleship and Leadership Formation focuses on equipping the whole people of God (both clergy and laity) to make disciples of Jesus, form leaders, and transform communities. The unit was formed in 2023 by bringing together the former Discipleship Ministries and the Office of Ministry.

New and Renew, a church planting and revitalization conference, was offered for the first time as a hybrid event and for the first time at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill. The keynote speaker was Jessi Cruikshank. Held in May with the theme "Disciples: Called, Equipped, and in the Neighborhood," the conference brought together 101 people, 52 in person and 49 online.

Of the 23 workshops, three were in Spanish. Two of the worship services were in Spanish, and translation at all five services was offered in both languages. Gilbert Romero and Rich Brode led a diverse worship band. The conference was organized by Stan Dueck, director of organizational leadership, with help from an advisory

committee and administrative support from program assistant Randi Rowan.

National Older Adult Conference brought hundreds of Brethren to Lake Junaluska, N.C., for worship, study, fellowship, and service under the theme "God is Doing a New Thing." Registration was 581, with 551 in person and 30 signed up to attend virtually. In addition, nine of the Church of the Brethren-related retirement communities streamed the main sessions for their residents. A fundraising walk raised more than \$5,000 for a NOAC scholarship fund to help more people attend future conferences. The event was organized by Christy Waltersdorff and the NOAC planning team.

The Youth and Young Adult office, led by director Becky Ullom Naugle, hosted several events. Christian Citizenship Seminar gathered under the theme "Hot and Hungry" to learn about issues related to food insecurity caused by climate change. Guided by 1 Kings 17:7-16, the 21 students and advisors from four districts met with activists and legislators in Washington, D.C.

At Young Adult Conference, hosted at Camp Alexander Mack, 21 participants met in May to explore the theme “I’m Not Done with You Yet,” based on Jeremiah 18:1-6. The next month, 164 people from 11 districts traveled to Juniata College for National Junior High Conference, which focused on Micah 6:8 and the theme “What Does God Want From Me?”

The Youth and Young Adult office produced social media posts for youth and young adults, oversaw web pages for advisors and events, prepared worship resources for National Junior High Sunday and National Youth Sunday, published *The Bridge* newsletter for young adults, and led sessions for junior high youth at Annual Conference.

Joshua Brockway, director of spiritual formation, co-taught a Brethren Academy class in Atlanta on urban ministry. He presented a paper at a theological conference at the University of Dayton entitled “Destabilizing Imaginaries: Parables in Discipleship Formation.” He led or facilitated several webinars and livestreamed events, including a webinar on “Discipling our Imagination” and Drew Hart’s “From Statement to Action” hybrid seminar.

Nathan Polzin joined the team as executive director of Discipleship and Leadership Formation. In addition to the administrative work involved in merging two departments, he led evangelism training for congregations and conducted a search for a new director of intercultural ministries, who began in early 2024. He was grateful to Don Mitchell and Cesia Salcedo for serving on the interview team. In the absence of a director, Polzin brought a committee together to provide leadership for the multicultural luncheon and Spanish speaking leaders’ luncheon at Annual Conference.

Polzin attended four district conferences, preaching at three of them and leading pastor training sessions and other insight sessions.

Staff from Discipleship and Leadership Formation provided webinars, deacon training, coaching, and consulting for congregations and districts, as well as a variety of equipping sessions at Annual Conference. Staff provided additional resources to pastors and congregations through collaboration with the Anabaptist Disabilities Network, Christian Community Development Association, and We Rise International, which works with mental health, trauma, and addictions.

Brethren Faith in Action grants were awarded to

congregations and camps to help them bring ministry vision to reality. In 2023, \$67,448 was granted to 17 applicants.

Ministry Office

In its role of supporting the calling, training, credentialing, and sustaining of ministers throughout the denomination, the Ministry Office navigates the changing face of the ministerial landscape through strong partnerships with district and institutional entities.

A key function of the office is overseeing the placement, orientation, and review of district executive ministers. Full-time executives were placed in Virlina (Daniel Rudy) and South/Central Indiana districts (Laura Stone). Executives William Waugh (Southern Pennsylvania), Bruce Holderreed (Idaho/Western Montana), Jose Calleja Otero (Puerto Rico), and Randy Yoder (interim, Western Plains) completed terms of service. Four districts continued active search processes for new leadership.

Statistics from the past year reveal the fluid reality of district leadership. Of the 24 districts, 54 percent are led by “permanently called” solo executives, whether full-time or part-time. Only 29 percent of districts are currently served by full-time executive ministers, while 71 percent are led by part-time executives. The variety of part-time leaders includes solo interims, volunteer executives, and volunteers serving as representatives to the Council of District Executives.

A few districts are successfully using a team model of executive leadership. In the same way that the shortage of candidates for congregations in a pastoral search has dramatically increased, so too have the needs increased on the district level. The Ministry Office has encouraged districts to embrace the priesthood of all believers and the discernment of spiritual gifts within congregations and districts, with the intention of renewing a more robust practice of calling.

Director Nancy Sollenberger Heishman provided orientation sessions for various districts’ assessment teams and ethics committees as they maintain readiness to assist with ministerial ethics processes. She also offered the annual presentation on ministerial ethics in conjunction with the retirement readiness seminar of Eder Financial.

The Ministry Office serves as liaison to several committees, including the Pastoral Compensation and

Benefits Advisory Committee. This committee partnered with Eder Financial and Mission and Ministry Board leadership to revise the Housing Equity Fund for pastors. Given the unfavorable tax consequences built into the fund's creation, changes proposed to Conference delegates promise a more beneficial housing fund. The committee saw Annual Conference delegates approve the revision of the Guidelines for Continuing Education paper.

Over 100 attended a Ministers' Association pre-conference continuing education event led by Sheila Wise Rowe on the topic "Healing Racial Trauma: The Road to Resilience and Beloved Community."

The number of ministers added to the ministerial body in 2023 were 25 ordained (15 male, 10 female), 3 commissioned (3 male), and 28 licensed (18 male, 10 female).

Office manager Mishael Nouveau facilitated the disbursement of several funds: scholarships for continuing education (\$4,770), leadership development and training grants (\$4,074), the Ministry Assistance Fund (\$10,077), and the annual scholarship grant to Bethany Seminary (\$5,000). The Robert C. Wenger Charitable Trust donated \$3,750 toward the Ministry Assistance Fund.

The Part-Time Pastor; Full-Time Church program, a grant-funded Thriving in Ministry initiative, offers opportunities for pastors to connect with peers; deepen spiritual practices that tend to their spiritual, emotional, and physical needs; and stay intimately connected to God's purpose for their ministry.

Jen Jensen resigned as the program manager for the initiative in July, a role she began in 2021. Her leadership increased the presence of the program throughout the denomination. Funding was secured for a Reflective Practices retreat for leadership and advisors of the program, and Jensen began exploring long-term sustainability practices. Circuit riders Aida Sanchez and Keith Funk also concluded their work with the program. Richard Wehrle assumed the role of program manager in September; he also serves as pastor of Midland Church of the Brethren in Mid-Atlantic District. Founa Badet and Mayra Calix joined the program as circuit riders. Tabitha Hartman Rudy was hired as administrative assistant early in the year.

Program leaders were visible at Annual Conference helping with leadership for the Ministers' Association event, leading an equipping session, and connecting

with pastors and other leaders in the exhibit hall.

Representatives for the program attended nearly all of the district conferences, providing equipping sessions, reporting on the program, and connecting with leaders.

In 2023, Part-Time Pastor; Full-Time Church provided individuals and groups with grants totaling \$43,066, helping to fund sabbaticals, retreats, and continuing education events for ministers. Circuit riders hosted four distinct book studies with 67 registrants, prioritizing peer relationships and group learning on vital topics in ministry. Sixteen participants engaged in spiritual practices hosted online during the Lenten season.

The Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership, directed by Janet Ober Lambert, is a ministry training partnership of the Church of the Brethren and Bethany Theological Seminary that equips leaders through four training programs as well as continuing education.

In 2023, Training in Ministry (TRIM) engaged 22 students. The congregationally based training program, Education for a Shared Ministry (EFSM) and its Spanish-language counterpart, EPMC, involved six congregations, with a combination of eight ministry students. Seminario Bíblico Anabautista Hispano de la Iglesia de los Hermanos (SeBAH-COB) supported 15 students. Six of the SeBAH-COB students were members of the Global Brethren, representing Honduras and Venezuela.

Program coordinators Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey, Aida Sanchez, and, most recently, Arlyn Morales, oversaw these programs, with support from administrative assistant Fran Massie. In addition, the academy provided guidance for six Academy Certified Training Systems (ACTS), which offer regionally based ministry training.

Revisions of the TRIM program were completed in 2023. Key changes include a greater number of required subjects, more subjects required from a Brethren perspective, but fewer courses required overall. The TRIM program no longer requires 10 college credits.

The continuing education program, Strength for the Journey, completed five cohorts in 2023, one in person and four online. New cohorts form each year.

Through the Brethren Academy, 51 continuing education certificates were provided for engagement in academy courses, seminars, and programs. The academy also provided 266 CEU certificates for events or courses offered by other agencies. Three people took a course for personal enrichment.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Organizational Resources provides support for denominational staff and ministries through the Brethren Historical Library and Archives, Buildings and Grounds, Finance, and Information Technology. Shawn Flory Replegle is the executive director.

Brethren Historical Library and Archives

The Brethren Historical Library and Archives is the official repository for Church of the Brethren records documenting the ministries of the church, including committee and staff agendas and minutes, congregational records, print materials, and historical literature and items. Staff are available to districts, congregations, and individuals for research and historical study.

Jen Houser served as director through September, and Ashley Scarr as intern through August. Since that time, Allison Snyder has been interim manager.

In 2023, BHLA staff answered over 332 research questions, acquired over 499 linear feet of archival materials, and added 22 books to the collection. The archives received materials detailing the centennial of EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Acquisitions were received from David Shumate and the Virlina District office, Estella Horning, Kenneth Guy, and John Long, as well as church files and photos from Church of the Brethren congregations that have closed.

Buildings and Grounds

Buildings and Grounds staff maintain the physical spaces where employees carry out many of the ministries of the church. Salvador Campero directs the work at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill., assisted by Lee Marsh. Francie Coale directs the work at the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Md., assisted by Felix Hill.

The General Offices provide office space for staff of the Church of the Brethren and Eder Financial and a warehouse used by Brethren Press for inventory and shipping. The warehouse is also a drop-off location for Church World Service and Lutheran World Relief donations. In addition, the Living Gospel Church of God

in Christ congregation has rented space in the building for over 25 years.

At the Brethren Service Center, a large warehouse contains sorting areas for Material Resources and storage for disaster relief materials, and SERRV uses part of the warehouse as its main distribution center. The center has offices for several denominational ministries.

The Church of the Brethren also owns two other properties. One is Germantown Church of the Brethren, where the Germantown Trust maintains the property and helps interpret the history of the “mother church” of the Schwarzenau Brethren groups. In Lybrook, N.M., the Church of the Brethren works with Lybrook Community Ministries to maintain the facilities of a ministry that has existed there since 1955. Community outreach includes distribution of clean water and burials in the Lybrook cemetery.

Finance

The Finance team oversees the Church of the Brethren’s financial health and liability concerns. The team provides tracking and reporting for financial records, maintains insurance, receives donations and gifts, pays expenses, provides nonprofit tax-exempt status documentation for districts and congregations, administers grants, and ensures the Church of the Brethren receives the highest ratings our independent auditors can provide regarding organizational financial health.

Ed Woolf, director of finance and treasurer, manages estate giving, split-interest gifts, pastors housing fund accounts, corporate credit card accounts, and corporate insurance policies, and he provides financial, budget, and accounting services. Pat Marsh, accountant and assistant treasurer, oversees the annual audit and is responsible for budget support, financial reports, and cash management services. Other members of the team are Lynn Phelan, accounts payable specialist; Barb Watt, financial operations specialist and payroll manager; and Nancy Watts, donation and accounts receivable specialist.

Information Technology

The Information Technology team provides computer, telephone, internet, and audiovisual support to

keep denominational staff connected and communicating effectively. Their work includes internet access and security, network management, computer hardware and software, database maintenance, phone system, keycard system at the General Offices, registration support for events, and technological support for meetings.

Francie Coale is the director, Joshua Rowan is information technology specialist, and Lauren Bukszar is database specialist.

Financial results for 2023

Total giving to Core Ministries finished \$108,000 below budget and \$105,000 behind 2022 giving. Congregational giving totaled \$1.5 million, a decrease of \$47,000, while individual giving totaled \$653,000, a decrease of \$58,000 from the prior year. With the decrease in total giving, including a \$186,000 transfer in designated funds, income to Core Ministries finished the year \$223,000 behind budget.

Despite the surging costs and high inflationary economy last year, total director-level expenses finished the year at \$5.2 million and \$171,000 under budget. However, because of the income shortfall, Core Ministries ended the year with a net deficit of \$52,000. This deficit lowered the Core Ministries' net asset balance to \$2.1 million.

Several areas are outside Core Ministries and considered Self-Funding Ministries. Material Resources finished the year with a deficit of \$69,000, as donations

remained below pre-pandemic levels and supply expenses continued to increase. This loss increased Material Resources' net asset deficit balance to \$257,000.

The Annual Conference Office budget benefited from a distribution of \$129,000 from Brotherhood Mutual Partnership Funds, an action taken by the Leadership Team. Otherwise the Conference Office would have sustained a \$63,000 deficit due to decreased registration income and rising expenses. Because of this distribution, the Conference Office finished the year with a \$66,000 surplus, increasing its net asset balance to \$434,000.

Donations to both the Emergency Disaster Fund and the Global Food Initiative Fund decreased this past year. Donations to Brethren Disaster Ministries totaled \$1.9 million, a decrease of \$300,000. Giving to the Global Food Initiative Fund totaled \$262,000, a decrease of \$60,000.

Investments totaled approximately \$36 million at the end of 2023. This is up \$2.7 million from the 2022 year-end balance of \$33.3 million. The Church of the Brethren's investment strategy focuses on long-term goals, risk tolerances, timelines, and purposes of funds. Staying disciplined to this strategy makes it possible for the church to navigate market volatility and uncertainties from year to year. The investment gain in 2023 helped total net assets increase \$2.6 million, resulting in a year-end balance of \$42.3 million.

[The above amounts were provided prior to completion of the 2023 audit. Complete financial information is available in the Church of the Brethren, Inc., audit report published in June 2024.]

OFFICE OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY

The General Secretary of the Church of the Brethren, David Steele, serves as staff for the Mission and Ministry Board, overseeing the employees and ministries of the Church of the Brethren and representing the church in its various ecumenical commitments. Nancy Miner is manager of the Office of the General Secretary.

Mission and Ministry Board

The Mission and Ministry Board is the board of directors of the Church of the Brethren, carrying

out the direction set by Annual Conference. The Board met at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill., for its spring and fall meetings and in Cincinnati prior to Annual Conference. Meetings included reports on finances, ministry areas, committees, and denominational agencies, along with time spent in worship, prayer, training, and fellowship.

In October the Board made the difficult decision to close the Material Resources program, a legacy program based at the Brethren Service Center. The decision to wind down the program over a period of up to 30 months came following an extensive review of best practices in

material aid and in consultation with staff and partner organizations. Other ministries housed at the Brethren Service Center are not affected by the decision.

Also in October, a small group of intercultural guests joined the meeting via Zoom to share concerns from their experiences as intercultural leaders in the Church of the Brethren. Topics of concern included racist incidents within the church, inadequate or inaccurate translation and interpretation, turnover of Intercultural Ministries staff, denominational leadership's lack of intentional engagement with the intercultural community, and fears that the Church of the Brethren is becoming "open and affirming." As part of the Board's commitment to be in dialogue, the Executive Committee responded with a letter inviting the guests to meet with the General Secretary and the Board Chair.

The Board issued three statements in 2023:

- A resolution lamenting the Doctrine of Discovery called on the Church of the Brethren to "commit to ongoing advocacy, dialogue, education, and relationship-building regarding rights of Indigenous peoples," along with specific action steps. It was sent to Annual Conference, where it was amended and approved.
- A statement was issued in response to learning of reported sexual abuse by a former employee several decades ago.
- A statement on "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" called on church members to engage in advocacy for political and humanitarian solutions to end the violence in Israel and Palestine and reiterated the denomination's 1970 Annual Conference statement that all war is sin.

The Board's Strategic Plan, adopted in 2020, supports the denominational vision to be "Jesus in the Neighborhood." Mid-term and short-term goals guide continued progress toward that vision, including the work of recognizing racial injustice in the church and the first in a series of Kingian Nonviolence training sessions for Board members.

Other Board actions included formation of a new Facilities Stewardship Committee to oversee the management of and forecast the needs for Church of the Brethren properties; approval of a 2024 Core Ministries deficit budget of \$5,507,000 of income and \$5,546,120 expense; changes to the Pastors Housing Fund; and

affirmation of the Global Church of the Brethren Communion bylaws.

The Board approved \$766,500 in Emergency Disaster Fund grants for emerging needs and ongoing projects, including \$195,000 for humanitarian response following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and \$240,000 for the Nigeria Crisis Response. The Executive Committee approved an additional \$102,400 in grants for international and domestic responses. The Board approved the purchase of two trucks for use at disaster response construction projects.

The Executive Committee approved a sabbatical leave for David Steele from April 1 through June 9, 2023. During that time, Shawn Flory Replogle, executive director of Organizational Resources, served as acting General Secretary.

The elected membership of the Mission and Ministry Board consists of 10 women and 7 men. One member is Japanese American, four are African American, and 12 are white.

Office of Peacebuilding and Policy

The Office of Peacebuilding and Policy based in Washington, D.C., represents the denomination in coalitions and working groups and at events that address areas of concern for the Church of the Brethren based on denominational policy.

Clara Grabenhorst, a Brethren Volunteer Service volunteer at Creation Justice Ministries, helped organize the Christian Citizenship Seminar, the annual policy education seminar for Brethren youth that is co-sponsored by Youth and Young Adult Ministries and the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy. The focus was the Farm Bill and food insecurity caused by climate change.

Cornelius Raff joined the office in August as a volunteer through BVS focusing primarily on US immigration and asylum policy and on climate policy issues on behalf of the Brethren Creation Care Network. Research and advocacy fellow Chidinma Chidoka coordinated the Nigeria Working Group art exhibition at Washington City Church of the Brethren.

Doris Abdullah, serving on a volunteer basis as the Church of the Brethren representative to the United Nations, tracked UN work on several international policy issues. In November, Mary Abraham joined the office as a policy and strategy associate volunteer and has started providing support on several writing and coalition

strategy processes.

The Death Row Support Project transitioned to a dispersed leadership structure following the retirement of longtime volunteer director Rachel Gross. This year the project met its goal of 75 pen pals for people in the general prison population.

Director Nathan Hosler convened the Nigeria Working Group and the Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare. Along with many partner organizations, the drones working group helped to get a bill introduced in Congress to increase accountability and transparency of lethal drone strikes conducted by the CIA.

Hosler was part of a broad coalition that worked for a ceasefire in Gaza, the release of hostages, and humanitarian aid. Recognizing little focus on China and East Asia Policy inside the Washington, D.C., interfaith community, Hosler invested effort in building a network structure and talking to experts in this field. He represented the denomination on numerous boards, including National Farm Worker Ministry, Heifer International, Churches for Middle East Peace, and Creation Justice Ministries.

Annual Conference Office

We are called “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12-13). Echoing this call, Annual Conference strives “to unite, strength, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.”

Moderator Tim McElwee led the 236th recorded Annual Conference around the theme “Living God’s Love.” Gathering in Cincinnati, the Brethren built and renewed relationships, handled a heavy business agenda, raised voices in song, joined hearts in prayer, and worshiped God together. Worship included a diverse set of preachers, a range of musical styles, and a bread-and-cup communion service.

A plenary address by Chad Brennan focused on racial justice. Other educational opportunities were a variety of equipping sessions and trips to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and the Nancy and David Wolf Holocaust and Humanity Center.

The 1,463 registrants consisted of 441 delegates, 952 in-person non-delegates, and 70 non-delegates participating virtually.

Conferencegoers donated 120 units of blood to the local

blood bank and more than \$12,423 and material goods that filled several pallets to overflowing in support of Found House, this year’s Witness to the Host City project. Found House provides services and support to those experiencing housing insecurity in the Cincinnati area.

Participants gave \$29,355 through offerings to support Annual Conference and core denominational ministries. A silent auction raised an additional \$12,895 for Annual Conference and Brethren Disaster Ministries. The silent auction, along with a game night, a small performance stage, and live podcast recordings throughout the week were part of an initiative to make the exhibit hall a vital gathering place.

After a successful virtual conference in 2021 and opportunities for virtual participation in 2022, this year virtual registrants were able to observe business sessions, the Walking Roots Band concert, and selected equipping sessions. Worship was livestreamed at no charge.

Annual Conference is possible because many people volunteer time and energy in support of Christ and the church. The onsite coordinator was Nan Hottle, from Southern Ohio and Kentucky District. Other volunteers assisted in tasks as varied as registration, age-group activities, first aid, Spanish translation, and Bible study leadership.

Financially, 2023 was another challenging year. Attendance was lower than expected because of the financial struggles of many smaller congregations, as well as conflict and division in the church. Despite conservative budgeting, the year ended with a deficit of about \$63,000.

The deficit was absorbed by the Annual Conference contingency fund, and that fund was replenished by a disbursement of \$129,000 from Brotherhood Mutual dividends. This made it possible to end the year in the black. Staff continue to work toward a more sustainable model that will work for the long term.

In addition to planning the annual meeting itself, Annual Conference director Rhonda Pittman Gingrich and Conference assistant Debbie Noffsinger provided administrative support for the work of various groups related to Annual Conference: Annual Conference Officers, Program and Arrangements Committee and Worship Committee, Standing Committee and its subcommittees, Nominating Committee, Leadership Team, and the committees on Calling Denominational Leadership, Breaking Down Barriers, and Standing with People of Color.

Brethren Press

The Shine curriculum project, jointly published by Brethren Press and

MennoMedia, was awarded a grant of \$1.25 million from Lilly Endowment Inc. As part of Lilly's Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative, the grant will help parents and caregivers share their faith and values with their children. Shine is using the grant for a new five-year project called Shine Everywhere, which will accompany congregations and households in developing spiritual practice materials that inspire families to embody the story of God in everyday life.

A major new publication from Shine was *The Peace Table: A Storybook Bible*, a collection of 140 Bible stories with a wide array of artwork from 30 illustrators. The book is the centerpiece of the latest round of Shine curriculum for children. Also from Shine was *Changemakers Lab*, the 2023 vacation Bible school material.

To mark the 75th anniversary of Brethren Volunteer Service, Brethren Press published *A Year of Living Differently*, by James H. Lehman. The book includes first-person accounts from BVSers and an extensive appendix listing the more than 7,000 volunteers who have served. Also published in 2023 was *Luke and Acts: Turning the World Upside Down*, by Christina Bucher and Robert W. Neff. The book gives special attention to what Luke and Acts have to say to Anabaptists and radical Pietists.

Liz Bidgood Enders wrote the Lenten devotional, *My Soul, My Life, My All*, and Kevin Kessler wrote the Advent devotional, *All Things New*. Writers for the quarterly *A Guide for Biblical Studies* were Frank Ramirez, David Shumate, Bobbi Dykema, and David Leiter. The 2023 Church of the Brethren Yearbook, created by Jim Miner, was published in digital form. Photos in the Living Word Bulletin Series are now almost all by Brethren photographers, a positive result of the series shifting to being produced completely in-house.

At the Brethren Press/Messenger Dinner at Annual Conference, Jennifer Keeney Scarr presented on the topic of biblical storytelling.

Heidi Gross became managing editor of Brethren Press in 2023. Jeff Lennard is director of marketing and sales, Karen Warner is part-time customer service specialist, and Dan McFadden works part-time in shipping. The publisher is Wendy McFadden, who is also executive director of Communications. Karen Stocking is finance and production assistant for both areas.

Communications

Messenger magazine highlighted in words and photos a number of milestones and major events in 2023—the centennial of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria, the Brethren World Assembly, and the 300th anniversary of the first Brethren baptism in the Americas and Germantown (Pa.) Church of the Brethren. Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford, director of News Services and associate editor of *Messenger*, traveled to these historic events for significant coverage in both *Messenger* and Newline.

News Services provides information and promotes engagement and knowledge of the breadth and depth of denominational and church-related ministries. Sharing the Brethren voice with the wider world is a key task. The work is carried out by staff and volunteers through Newline, a free email news service; the Newline Digest pages in *Messenger* magazine; the news pages at www.brethren.org; and social media.

Messenger received four awards from the Associated Church Press: the award of excellence in a special category, the James Solheim Award for Editorial Courage, for “If Only That Were True,” by Gimbiya Kettering; award of excellence in national reporting for “Take Me Home, Brethren Roads,” by Walt Wiltschek; award of merit for “From the publisher” column, by Wendy McFadden; and award of merit for the design of “Unspoken and Unsung Mystery: Stained Glass Speaks of God,” designed by Paul Stocksdale.

Diane Stroyeck, subscription specialist, is *Messenger's* only full-time employee.

The web team, made up of Jan Fischer Bachman and Russ Otto, supported all offices and ministries through creating and updating web pages on www.brethren.org, as well as the ministry profiles site and the blog. Behind the scenes, the team kept website platforms current and problem-free. In 2023 they processed and uploaded thousands of photos at Annual Conference and National Older Adult Conference, using new photo storage software after the prior system became overwhelmed and stopped working.

The team handled bulk email for many offices and assisted with the creation and updating of online forms and surveys, connecting them to the email system, when needed, for greater efficiency. They posted videos, from short promotional pieces to lengthy worship services

and webinars. As part of her involvement with social media, Fischer Bachman developed a resource on social media for the Ministry Office’s ministerial ethics training materials.

Human Resources

The Human Resources office, staffed by manager Shamek Cardona, oversees the organization’s employment policies and services, ensuring compliance with legal requirements.

Employees hired in 2023 were Walt Wiltschek, office coordinator for Brethren Volunteer Service; Nathan Polzin, executive director of Discipleship and Leadership Formation; Carole Davenport, office manager for Global Mission; Carolyn Neher, associate director of Children’s Disaster Services; Heidi Gross, managing editor of Brethren Press; Virginia Rendler, interim volunteer coordinator for BVS; Samuel Carter, sorter/packer medical supplies in Material Resources; and Richard Wehrle, program manager for the Office of Ministry.

Departures in 2023 were Pauline Liu, interim volunteer coordinator for BVS; Lisa Crouch, associate director of Children’s Disaster Services; Jennifer Jensen, program manager for the Office of Ministry; Jennifer Houser, director of the Brethren Historical Library and Archives; and Jeff Boshart, manager of the Global Food Initiative.

Total regular full-time and part-time employees and Brethren Volunteer Service workers serving Church of the Brethren programs is 60. As requested by Annual Conference, the report of ethnic/racial composition of these employees is the following: Asian–1; Black or African American–3; Hispanic or Latino–2; white–54.

In addition to these employees, the Church of the

Brethren has contract, shared, casual, and temporary employees, as well as program volunteers.

Mission Advancement

Mission Advancement staff educate and equip individual donors and congregations about the financial needs of the organization and how their financial gifts are used to carry out the ministries of the church. The team builds relationships through visits, interpretation, and education and provides ways for donors and congregations to give financially to support those ministries.

Mission Advancement advocates Nancy McCrickard and Shannon McNeil Smith communicated regularly with donors, focusing on “stewarding relationships” as a means of keeping donors educated and informed about the work of the denomination in the United States and internationally.

Matt DeBall, Mission Advancement communication coordinator, managed quarterly congregational offerings, eBrethren email communication, and monthly direct letters. He served as the denomination’s representative on the ecumenical One Great Hour of Sharing committee, where he was convener.

Traci Rabenstein, executive director, visited with congregation, pastors, and lay leaders to provide insight into the work of the denomination. She worked with data management for the organization.

The team hosted the annual Faith Forward Donor Circle dinner at Annual Conference to thank donors who have planned to leave a sustaining contribution in their will or estate plans or contributed planned distributions from various trusts or IRA accounts. The team produced a narrative report to explain how contributions are used.

CONCLUSION

The words here are many, but still they convey only a summary of the work of the Church of the Brethren. For ways to learn more, visit the website at www.brethren.org. Visitors there can find information to read, ways to get involved, and contact details for staff.

We offer this report in a spirit of deep gratitude—

gratitude for the God whose love has been poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5) and gratitude for all who join in sharing that good news with the world. Thank you for generous hearts and willing hands.

Colin Scott, Chair

David Steele, General Secretary