

Doing Annual Conference Differently June 2022

Background – From the Leadership Team

Annual Conference has been a space in which members of and participants in the Church of the Brethren have gathered to engage in prayer, worship, conversation, deliberation, discernment, relationship building, and growing together. These functions of Annual Conference have, over the course of time, produced statements and information that offer helpful insights about our identity. Simultaneously, however, these statements have also led to disagreement and division. In addressing these disagreements, we have kept the mission of Annual Conference, “*to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus,*” at the heart of our deliberations. Nonetheless, many members of the church, from a wide range of perspectives, remain frustrated with the church’s position on these matters.

The Compelling Vision process at Annual Conference offered us an opportunity to experience a different way of doing business that replaced the contentious arguments and polarizing debates with prayerful discernment as we engaged together in the work of the church. The Leadership Team wondered if there were other items of Annual Conference business that could also reflect a more discerning engagement. The conversation progressed beyond talking about how we process business to ask if there are other changes to Annual Conference that may need to be considered, given the ongoing changes in the church and the impact of the pandemic. With that in mind the Leadership Team called together a committee to make recommendations on how we might do Annual Conference differently – to re-frame the focus of the Annual Conference to make the schedule, events, and time usage more in keeping with the Annual Conference mission statement: “*Annual Conference exists to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.*” Those called to serve on the committee were Kayla Alphonse, Linetta Alley Ballew, Eric Landram, Christy Waltersdorff, Kevin Kessler (who served as facilitator), Chris Douglas (Annual Conference Director), Rhonda Pittman Gingrich (incoming Annual Conference Director), and David Steele (General Secretary).

The committee met six times within a four-and-a-half month period in order to bring a proposal to the October 2021 Leadership Team meeting. In preparing the proposal, the committee:

- Read and reviewed documentation from the 2012 Annual Conference Revitalization Task Force; an Insight Session from the 2019 Annual Conference on the topic of *A New Vision for the Big Meeting*; and the 2007 statement on Doing Church Business.
- Brainstormed about their personal wishes and thoughts for a re-framed Annual Conference.
- Consulted with Church of the Brethren historians, Mennonite conference leaders, youth/young adult leaders, Everence conference leaders, and intercultural groups within the Church of the Brethren.

Then they compiled and consolidated a list of specific ideas and proposals, grouped into four emerging and key categories: worship, relationship building, equipping, and business.

The Leadership Team reviewed the first three sections of the report (*Relationship Building, Worship, and Equipping Sessions*) and was aware that some of the changes noted there were already being addressed by the Annual Conference Program and Arrangements Committee. These three sections were shared with the Program and Arrangements Committee to further review and consider since the items in those sections fell within the purview of its work.

The *Business* section—which poses questions rather than proposals—is still under review by the Leadership Team, which recognizes that any potential changes to the query process or the manner in which the Standing Committee or the delegate body handles business is a matter of polity and can only be changed through the current process described in our polity and approved by the delegate body.

The Leadership Team will continue its review of the entirety of the report and through the Annual Conference Officers will engage both the 2022 Standing Committee and Annual Conference delegates in further conversations on how the focus of Annual Conference might be changed so that the schedule, events, and time usage better reflect the Annual Conference mission statement: “*Annual Conference exists to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.*” This report is not being shared as a recommendation to the 2022 Annual Conference. Rather, it is shared as an invitation to further conversation.

It is important to recognize that change to any aspect of Annual Conference could have systematic impacts on other aspects of Annual Conference. If it is programmatic in nature, the Program and Arrangements Committee and perhaps the Leadership Team as the executive committee of the Annual Conference, will need to weigh to the best of our ability, the impact not only on the Conference itself, but on the church. If changes to the way we handle business are to be considered, we will need to discern if the proposed changes would need the attention of the Annual Conference delegates to consider changes to the polity.

Our Annual Conference practices, guided in part by polity, are well established. With a declining church membership and participation at Annual Conference, as well as questions about hybrid access to Annual Conference and rising venue and travel costs, it may be wise to consider a more wholistic look at changes to the way we do Annual Conference to adjust to the changing needs of the church. More importantly, we should be assessing those practices to make certain they are meeting the needs of the Church of the Brethren while keeping them attuned to the mission of Annual Conference of uniting, strengthening, and equipping the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.

As you read the report: What excites you? Which of these observations or recommendations gives you anxiety or concern? What other thoughts or ideas do you have about how to do Annual Conference differently?

The Leadership Team is passing this report on to the Standing Committee asking: Where do we go from here? Does it merit further study? What should our next steps be?

The Leadership Team wants to express its appreciation to the Doing Annual Conference Differently Committee for its report below, and exceptional work and recommendations that would provide impact and increase the value of the Annual Conference mission.

The Leadership Team

General Secretary David A. Steele

Annual Conference Moderator David Sollenberger

Annual Conference Moderator-elect Tim McElwee

Annual Conference Secretary James M. Beckwith

District Executive representative on Leadership Team Torin S. Eikler

Annual Conference Director Rhonda Pittman Gingrich, staff support

Proposal to Leadership Team October 2021

Introduction

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

--*Isaiah 43:18-19a (NRSV)*

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;

²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

--*Lamentations 3:22-23 (NRSV)*

In our out of the way places of the heart,
Where your thoughts never think to wander,
This beginning has been quietly forming,
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,
A path of plentitude opening before you.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

--excerpt from For a New Beginning, a blessing from John O'Donohue

Vision

Annual Conference is a space in which members and participants in the Church of the Brethren gather to engage in prayer, worship, conversation, deliberation, discernment, building relationships, and growing together. These functions of Annual Conference have over the course of time produced statements and information that offer helpful insights about our identity. Simultaneously, these identifying functions have led to disagreement and division. The focus of Annual Conference, therefore, is more concerned with resolving the issues and matters at hand which minimalizes the mission to unite, strengthen, and equip.

To build on the Annual Conference mission, this committee offers the following proposals for more than consideration. The proposals, we believe, have the capacity to bring radical change that will encourage more unity, strength to thrive, and doors to open for equipping opportunities. The committee appeals to the Leadership Team to intentionally implement these proposals in cooperation and collaboration with other groups, boards, and committees sharing capacity to multiply the Annual Conference mission emphases.

Future generations of the church hunger for the opportunities these proposals offer. In a season of unprecedented change forced upon us in various ways by a global pandemic, reframing and transforming Annual Conference practices and functions seems timely. We are primed for seeking the new, for adapting to methods and means that build our capacity to engage in an environment that looks and feels different, that offers hope when the status quo seems mundane and sliding backward. Now is the time to gift future generations with the liberty to lead and set the tone for the new day ahead. To do so entails letting go of the familiar and comfortable, to explore and engage the opportunities of new light.

Pondering the following questions lends credibility to the proposals set forth below.

1. What will the Church of the Brethren look like/be in one to two decades if Annual Conference continues in its present form?

2. What are the possibilities for the Church of the Brethren if the proposals in this document are brought into play?

Relationship Building

“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” –Hebrews 10:24-25

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” –John 13:34-35

For many, Annual Conference is a time to connect with friends, family, and colleagues from across the country and around the world. Greetings of “sister” and “brother” and references to the great “family reunion” are common. The chance to check in and catch up with old acquaintances and meet new friends and make new connections are highly anticipated and commonplace by regular attenders. This can, of course, be harder for first-time attendees, those new to the denomination, or those who feel unwelcome and on the fringes of the church community for a variety of reasons.

The 2021 Annual Conference evaluation reinforces what we know anecdotally that the relationships formed and nurtured through Annual Conference are a high priority for attendees and planners. Of the responses to the question, “What do you value about Annual Conference?”, 117 persons listed relationships as their top value, followed by 30 for worship as the next highest response. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance and core value of relationships and community.

As Annual Conference seeks to fulfill its mission to “unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus,” relationship-building must remain a central component that is more intentionally incorporated throughout the event. There is much already happening that should continue including new attendee orientation activities, age-group activities, meals events, and field trips, tours, and service projects at local sites. The following recommendations are offered to enhance relationship-building with each other and the local community (“neighborhood”) in line with the Annual Conference mission statement and the newly adopted compelling vision statement.

1. Prioritize relationship-building with each other and the “neighborhood” during worship services.
 - a. Promote round table interactions during worship such as sharing prayer requests and praying together, greeting one another, introductions, answering a question (“Where did you see Jesus in the neighborhood today?”), or responding to the

- scripture (in a lectio divina style) or sermon (“What did you hear God saying through the message?”)
- b. Invite local leaders, congregations, and ministries from the ecumenical community to speak, lead worship, share special music, and worship together.
2. Incorporate relationship-building with each other and the “neighborhood” in business sessions.
 - a. Facilitate round table sharing opportunities during business to get to know people, make connections, and laugh and play and have fun together! Share stories from their home congregations and communities, as well as their experience of Annual Conference and equipping sessions. Engage in meaningful conversation around thought-provoking questions related to business items. (Leadership from those trained and experienced in group formation and community building, such as On Earth Peace and the Outdoor Ministry Association could be utilized.)
 - b. Invite local leaders, congregations, and ministries from the ecumenical community to provide a keynote presentation, share “Jesus in the Neighborhood” stories, and lead equipping sessions.
 3. Implement schedule changes to emphasize relationship-building, “neighborhood” interactions, and healthier, holistic living.
 - a. Shift the evening, after worship, time to a relationship-building focus. While there may still be some limited equipping sessions offered, the emphasis for that part of the conference schedule should be on intentionally making space and providing opportunities in the conference venue and neighborhood for conversation, socializing, recreation, and rest. (What about a Zoom “night cap” call option for adults to join from their rooms once the kids are in bed?)
 - b. Incorporate an intergenerational-friendly, all-conference meal event, like an opening picnic, mid-conference “block party”, or closing brunch, into the registration cost and schedule.
 - c. Provide opportunities for intergenerational interactions including meal meet-ups, recreation options, service projects, and free-time activities, with a particular emphasis on connecting solo and first-time attendees.
 4. Utilize the exhibit hall as a central location for relationship-building with each other and the “neighborhood.”
 - a. Invite local small businesses and ministries to have exhibit space for the entire conference or just a specific day to be able to sell their products and/or share about their ministries.
 - b. Be intentional with creating spaces, like the hospitality area, for conversation and interaction in the exhibit hall and throughout the conference venue.

- c. Encourage exhibit hall attendance by having an exhibit hall meal event with food stations and activities for an unopposed time block.
- d. Incorporate spaces within the exhibit hall for participation in neighborhood-based service projects, intergenerational activities, and gathering donations/offerings.

Worship

“... for most persons, congregational worship and fellowship provide the only means to discover their togetherness in the body of Christ.” -*Kenneth Morse, “Move in Our Midst”*

Worship is an important part of who we are as the Church of the Brethren. Through worship, we come together as the body of Christ to ascribe glory, honor, and thanksgiving to God. Through worship, we join with one another to celebrate, lament, sing, and pray. Worship services are one aspect of the Annual Conference that reminds us that we are a church family created by Jesus Christ. Because worship draws us away from individuality and tribalism towards God who makes us one, Annual Conference would serve the church well by considering how our worship services can better strengthen, equip, and unite us in this season.

The following are recommendations regarding worship within three areas: diversity, time, and the neighborhood.

1. Diversity – An openness to new patterns, new styles, and new ways of worship to embrace the diversity in our midst
 - a. Planners and leaders - Since diversity is not novelty or superficial inclusion, it’s important to have wider cultural representation present to provide meaningful incorporation of diversity in worship services. We recommend that worship planners and leaders request the feedback and assistance of persons from diverse backgrounds (ethnic, language, ability, etc.). Persons from diverse backgrounds should be invited by the Program and Arrangements Committee to serve as worship planners and leaders. Persons of diverse backgrounds should be asked to serve in visible roles often.
 - b. Varied worship service formats - Worship that honors God exists in many different service formats. We recommend incorporating services at Annual Conference with liturgy that focuses on Prayer & Praise, Fasting, Lament, Testimony, and other. We recommend incorporating worship service formats that reflect the richness of worship experiences within various cultures. This would include incorporating various musical styles and genres.
 - c. Language inclusion - We are blessed to have speakers of other languages in our fellowship. It is a reminder to us of Paul’s words in Philippians 2 that “every tongue (language) will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” It’s also a gesture of

familial love to encourage worship expression in a person's "home" language. We recommend increased inclusion of other languages in the worship service.

- d. Images & media messaging that celebrate diversity – Our imagery and media should reflect the gathering we are currently and the gathering we hope to become (as portrayed in Revelation 7:9). We recommend that all worship imagery and media messaging promote diversity and inclusion that honors the fullness of God's creation.
2. Schedule – A greater time commitment dedicated to songs, hymns, prayers, and scripture reading as the gathered body
 - a. Morning worship service - In addition to the evening worship service, we recommend scheduling a morning worship service each full day of Annual Conference. The increased time for worship would encourage the gathered body as it approaches the business of the church. The morning worship service is not intended to replace bible study; however, it may accompany it. This service can be shorter in duration than the evening service.
 3. The Neighborhood – Fellowship with our neighbors in celebration of the larger community of Christ
 - a. Local clergy leadership – We recommend local clergy or church leaders be invited to participate in a visible role within a worship service. Potential visible roles include serving as the worship leader, as a special resource person (dance, music), or as the messenger. This would be a way to experience a worship expression found within the host city.
 - b. Invitation to worship together – We recommend welcoming neighboring congregations to attend an Annual Conference worship service. The invitation is an affirmation of the larger community of Christ present within the host city.
 - c. Prayer list – Understanding that Annual Conference provides us with an opportunity to bless the host city, we could pray for the neighborhood's well-being as a part of our worship. We recommend that prayer for the local community be incorporated into the worship services using a prayer list created by local leaders. This would mean asking local community leaders, officials, and clergy for prayer requests in advance.

Equipping Sessions

The Annual Conference mission statement says that *“Annual Conference exists to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.”* This recommendation from our committee will address the “equip” portion of the statement. Our team believes that this must be a primary focus of Annual Conference moving forward.

Our churches and organizations need equipping and educational resources now more than ever. As the church changes in the modern era, Annual Conference is in a great position to offer invaluable resources that our communities of faith can utilize and implement to aide them in their efforts to follow Jesus in their neighborhoods.

Our committee recommends placing a higher emphasis on opportunities for education and development that goes beyond the current “Insight Session” model of learning or presenting.

1. Offer more equipping sessions in the main conference hall that utilize a TED Talk or Pecha Kucha format (no longer than 20-minutes, resources below) that address a variety of topics that are both excellent and eclectic. A few examples might include sessions on incorporating children in worship, how to develop mission and vision statements, strengthening and training church or non-profit boards, assessing needs in the community, discovering opportunities in your own town to serve, planning and leading bible study, book groups, service trips, outdoor ministries, new membership and so on. By having these sessions occur in a shorter format we would allow for more voices and ideas to be heard and shared from across the denomination or from key figures from beyond the Church of the Brethren. Even more exciting would be the opportunity and possibility for professionally recording these sessions as they occur to then be placed on the denominational You Tube page or website as a resource for all churches, non-profits and even other anabaptists denominations after conference. Churches could then show the sessions to church members to assist in the “equipping” of community and church leaders.
2. We strongly encourage that these sessions speak to all generations: children, youth, young adults, adults and older adults alike.
3. The Annual Conference theme should speak directly to current needs or a special focus. The Programs and Arrangements Committee will use the theme to set the direction, tone, and course of the equipping sessions.
4. Using the language of “equipping sessions” implies something different than “insight session.” It must be communicated that these sessions exist to strengthen all leaders in their ministry and work and not just be hour-long commercials. True, these sessions would provide many opportunities to share stories and examples, but the main focus must be on helping attendees in practical ways that they can take with them. A recent communication to staff and agencies from our new Annual Conference Director, Rhonda Pittman-Gingrich, stated: *“All of your insight sessions will be interactive learning experiences that introduce or explore practical tools, skills, practices, or frameworks that participants can take home with them to enhance their personal or congregational*

ministry. In particular, we urge you to consider sessions related to discipleship formation, neighborhood engagement and missional outreach, leadership development, and stewardship enhancement.” Our committee affirms this direction and instruction from Rhonda. This perfectly summarizes our recommended direction.

5. Sharing these resources widely in the denomination will allow those who cannot attend Annual Conference to benefit. It is strongly encouraged to think creatively about how we might share these invaluable resources. Online, professional, visually stimulating, and updated resources are needed and could be made available online.

We feel that the Annual Conference is in a strong position to be the equipping and teaching epicenter in our denominational life together. To hear from more diverse (age, race, gender, etc) voices will help the Church of the Brethren expand its scope and rediscover its place in the neighborhoods where Christ calls us. To share widely our stories and insight as an anabaptist/pietist, historic peace church will further raise our profile and presence in a sea of other voices.

Thank you for the opportunity to have these discussions and dream. We are excited about the future of Annual Conference moving forward and we appreciate your leadership.

A few resources for reference:

www.pechakucha.com

www.ted.com

www.youtube.com/ted

<https://youtu.be/zpzZumZCdWA> (A Youtube video that shows a conference style discussion on mission/vision statements. We are not endorsing the discussion but using this as a format option.)

Business

After four years of doing Annual Conference differently (due to the Compelling Vision process and the pandemic), now is the time to make a change in the way we do business at Annual Conference. We believe there are things in the church that are more important than business. If “*Annual Conference exists to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus,*” it is probably time to address the ways in which our business sessions divide, weaken, and disempower individuals and congregations. We recommend three areas of examination: schedule, query process, and leadership.

1. Schedule – We propose making more space in the schedule for Relationship Building opportunities, Worship, and Equipping Sessions by shortening the agenda.
 - a. Decide which parts of business are necessary. (Elections, by-law changes, welcoming new fellowships, and international guests.)

- b. Find more meaningful ways to encourage table conversation, especially around thought-provoking questions related to business items.
 - c. Share information on denominational ministries through storytelling and creative presentations.
2. Query Process – The Yearly Meeting grew out of a need to maintain the unity and the identity of a growing church that was spreading out across the nation. Questions were brought to the meeting to reinforce unified behavior in the church. It is thought that the query process was first used 217 years ago in 1804. Denominational leadership must assess the strengths and weaknesses of this process which, many believe, has contributed to increased division and animosity in our denomination, reflecting on questions such as:
- a. Is the current query process an effective way to unite, strengthen, and equip the Church?
 - b. What do Annual Conference statements mean for the Church?
 - c. What is the role of Districts and Standing Committee in the query process?
 - d. Our processes have evolved over time to best meet current needs and situations. What needs are being met at this time by the query process? What current needs are not being met by the query process? (This last question was added by the Leadership Team.)
 - e. Does the current query process encourage or discourage participation in Annual Conference?
3. Leadership - We see a great need for more diversity (race, gender, ethnicity, geography) in the leadership of Annual Conference.
- a. We urge all denominational leadership, in collaboration with the Nominating Committee, to be intentional about addressing these concerns.
 - b. We recommend more training for District leadership and Standing Committee regarding their roles in discerning if queries unite, strengthen, and equip the church.
 - c. We recommend a structured ballot with a schedule for including those who are usually excluded from leadership.

Additional Items for Consideration

In addition to the specific recommendations offered above, we encourage the Leadership Team and Annual Conference leadership to consider the following:

- 1. Regarding the Role of Moderator
 - a. Are we calling a spiritual leader or someone who can run a business meeting?

- b. How can we transform the role and duties of this office to make it accessible for those who have the gifts to serve but little job and/or life flexibility?
- 2. Regarding the Host Reputation and History on Issues of Race, Justice, and Equality
 - a. We encourage the Program and Arrangements Committee to have conversations with Intercultural Ministries about a city before choosing a location.
 - b. We encourage the Program and Arrangements Committee to make plans to address any concerns about the reputation or history of the host city during Annual Conference.
- 3. Regarding Accessibility to Families
 - a. How can we make Annual Conference more accessible to families?
 - b. We encourage the Program and Arrangements Committee to keep this in mind as plans are made for costs, schedule, and programming.

Conclusion

These proposals, on the surface, can give Annual Conference a noticeable facelift. However, the overall impact will uphold and increase the value of the Annual Conference mission. Being united allows us to move in a common direction. Being strengthened ensures that we have the power to carry on and carry out the work of Jesus, peacefully, simply, and together. Being equipped empowers us to engage in new and exciting ventures once thought impossible to achieve. May God grant unity, strength, and capacity.

Doing Annual Conference Committee

Kayla Alphonse

Linetta Alley Ballew

Kevin Kessler, facilitator

Eric Landram

Christy Waltersdorff

Chris Douglas, Annual Conference Director

Rhonda Pittman Gingrich, incoming Annual Conference Director

David Steele, General Secretary