

UB 2. Query: Breaking Down Barriers – Increasing Access to Denominational Events

Brethren uphold the ideal that all congregations and all members should be equally represented at Annual Conference and other meetings, and we value the voice and participation of the entire body, all our members, to the fullest extent possible, as together we seek the mind of Christ.

Nevertheless, barriers to full and equal participation in wider church events, such as Annual Conference, exist due to factors such as:

- travel (distance, time, complexity, and cost);
- obstacles to travel (which might include pandemic travel restrictions, identification requirements, or others);
- cost of meals and accommodations;
- necessity of being away from home or work for extended periods of time; and
- physical obstacles, and less-than-ideal accessibility on-site.

Brethren from the West, from Puerto Rico, minorities, those with disabilities, those who are economically disadvantaged, and those with on-going work or family responsibilities, are especially impacted by these barriers, resulting in their being under-represented at such meetings. These factors also impact international Brethren.

We hold the realities of these barriers in tension with our ideals.

However, there is hope, as our world has changed and is still changing – as even we Brethren have experienced:

- 21st Century technologies now exist to help people and groups overcome barriers and share access easily. These resources are more accessible, secure, and cost-effective than ever before.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed us the opportunity to experience first-hand some of the rich possibility for technology to bring us together for worship and business, fellowship and connection. Many congregations have effectively used these technologies, including even home-bound members who were not able to participate previously.
- Online denominational events, beginning with the Love Feast in April 2020, reached many times the number of participants of recent Annual Conferences, and included Brethren from all over the world who could never have participated in person.
- Many district board meetings and conferences have been held online. They have included worship, reports, and secure methods for voting on business items.
- Alternative meeting strategies can allow good stewardship choices, reducing costs as well as environmental impacts that contribute to climate change.

In light of these observations, we are convinced that our current polity, which restricts voice and vote at Annual Conference to only those who have the ability,

time, and resources to be physically present, no longer serves us well. Therefore, we, the Living Stream Church of the Brethren – the denomination’s fully online congregation – feel that this is the proper time in our life together to raise the following question:

Should the Brethren explore the possibilities of how we can faithfully, in good order and with proper representation, use technology to remove barriers and facilitate the full participation of delegates and those desiring to be present for Annual Conference and other events, who might be better served – and could better serve the body – from a distance?

Approved and passed on to the Living Stream congregational body with the full unanimous consensus of the Living Stream Church of the Brethren church board at their regular board meeting, August 11, 2020.
Moderator, Sam Gahm

Approved and passed on to the Pacific Northwest District Board with the full unanimous consensus of the Living Stream Church of the Brethren congregation gathered in a specially called congregational meeting, August 16, 2020.
Moderator, Sam Gahm

Received with appreciation and support, and passed on to the Pacific Northwest District Conference by the Pacific Northwest District Board meeting online August 26, 2020.
Board Chair, Howard Ullery
Clerk, Carol Bowman

Approved by full consensus of the Pacific Northwest District Conference meeting online September 19, 2020.
Moderator, Ben Green
Clerk, Carol Bowman

Action of the 2022 Annual Conference: Pastoral team member Enten Eller explained the origin of the query from the Living Stream congregation, and District Executive Glenn Brumbaugh expressed the support of the Pacific Northwest District for the query. Standing Committee delegate Mary Lorah-Hammond from Michigan District presented Standing Committee’s recommendation. *Annual Conference adopted Standing Committee’s recommendation that the Query: Breaking Down Barriers – Increasing Access to Denominational Events be adopted and that Annual Conference create a study committee to examine the theological, philosophical, and practical implications of the query along with a feasibility study. The committee is to bring recommendations to the 2024 Annual Conference.*

The committee will consist of three (3) persons elected by Annual Conference who are familiar with denominational events; issues related to broad accessibility; virtual/hybrid meetings and/or webcasting. The committee will consult with the Director of Annual

1 *Conference, the Annual Conference webcast coordinator, and others as determined by*
2 *the committee. In subsequent action, Annual Conference elected Jeanne Davies, Bran-*
3 *don Grady, and Daniel Poole to serve as members of this study committee.*

4 5 **2023 Interim Report**

6 7 **Year One - Framing the Study**

8
9 Our first task was organizing ourselves as a committee and determining roles
10 and responsibilities. In our first meeting, which included the Director of Annual
11 Conference and the Annual Conference webcast coordinator, we decided after
12 much discussion and healthy debate that Jeanne Davies would fill the role of
13 secretary and carry the task of taking minutes and keeping the team organized
14 and Dan Poole would take on the task of chairing the committee.

15
16 Framing our work in simple terms, we are charged with considering how the
17 denomination might enlarge the tent of participation to those who have met bar-
18 riers toward full inclusion. At first glance, the call of this query seems to resonate
19 deeply with the spirit and ethos that we Brethren like to inhabit. How could one
20 in good conscience argue with the call to enlarge the tent of meeting so that
21 more might be welcome to attend? In this regard, it addresses a powerful and
22 positive inclination of our people to value the gathered community and the in-
23 trinsic worth of each individual. We intend to draw upon these good intentions
24 and determine how they might inform the recommendations we plan to bring.

25
26 However, we know that this question is not simple at all. We are aware that our
27 recommendations will carry many potentially far-reaching implications. There-
28 fore, we recognize that what is required as we examine the theological, philo-
29 sophical, and practical implications of this question is navigating our way
30 toward a complex and nuanced set of recommendations. We feel the full weight
31 of knowing that, as we examine this potential future path, the denominational
32 meeting process will likely emerge in an unfamiliar and strange place. But it is
33 not our task to determine what that future will look like but, to the best of our
34 abilities, faithfully discern what that new path might necessarily be.

35 36 **Our Initial Work**

37
38 After organizing ourselves, we dug into the work with dedication and determi-
39 nation. We have been meeting every other week since our inception. An essential
40 first step has been to determine the scope of our work. Careful attention to what
41 we are meant to address and what lies outside those bounds is a constant refrain
42 in our work together.

43
44 Some preliminary work has included scanning through and digesting several
45 documents, which would provide background information on how this ques-
46 tion has already been addressed. As we address the query, we intend to draw

context from this prior investigative work. These documents included: responses 1
from some earlier Annual Conference participation surveys, three different An- 2
nual Conference statements on accessibility, and the Doing Annual Conference 3
Differently Proposal from the Leadership Team. 4

As we sought to gain some new insights in our pursuit of information, we cre- 5
ated a denomination-wide survey to capture some initial data regarding how 6
well participants feel Annual Conference and other larger denominational meet- 7
ings are serving us. You all should have received this survey. We appreciate your 8
participation and value what you have to say about these critical questions. 9
10

Additionally, we have developed a strategy for inviting a few identified individ- 11
uals to sit in on several focus group listening sessions that we intend to conduct 12
over the spring and summer months of this year. These focus groups have been 13
organized to address the three categories of our investigation – the theological, 14
the philosophical, and the practical. 15
16

As we launch into this research, we are keeping the following considerations in 17
mind: 18
19

1. A thorough review of previous statements to build upon insights that have 20
already been gathered. 21
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2. The values that inform the Church of the Brethren ethos and substance. 23
24
3. A listing of the critical identified barriers to full participation: 25
a) travel (distance, time, complexity, and cost) 26
b) obstacles to travel (which might include pandemic travel restrictions, 27
identification requirements, or others) 28
c) cost of meals and accommodations 29
d) necessity of being away from home or work for extended periods, result- 30
ing in lost earned wages 31
e) physical obstacles and on-site physical restrictions 32
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We held the first of these focus group listening sessions when committee member 34
Brandon Grady and the Director of Annual Conference, Rhonda Pittman Gingrich, 35
met with the Council of District Executives during CODE’s annual winter meeting in 36
Florida. As of this writing, we have only done a preliminary review of the data gained 37
in that listening session. More review of this data will be necessary as we lay this in- 38
formation alongside what is learned through the other focus group listening sessions. 39
40

Next Steps 41

1. Formulate a meeting schedule to facilitate the remaining focus group listen- 42
ing sessions. 43
44
2. Configure a method to assess the large amount of data that we anticipate 45
receiving from the surveys and listening sessions. Much of this data will be 46

1 anecdotal. This type of data is time-consuming to digest and challenging to
2 evaluate in order to develop a meaningful summary.

- 3
4 3. Once the data has been summarized, frame out a feasibility study to address
5 the necessary resources for and practicality of carrying out any recommen-
6 dations of the committee.

7 8 **Conclusion**

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10 We appreciate the trust granted to us by the Annual Conference delegate body, and
11 we will continue to faithfully tend to this work as we are able. We trust that an ap-
12 propriate response can be reached through God’s leading and patient direction.

13 14 **The Study Committee Members**

15 Jeanne Davies, recorder

16 Brandon Grady

17 Dan Poole, convenor

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19 **Action of the 2023 Annual Conference:** The report was presented by the con-
20 venor of the committee, Dan Poole, accompanied by committee members
21 Jeanne Davies and Brandon Grady. *The written and oral interim reports of the*
22 *Breaking Down Barriers – Increasing Access to Denominational Events Com-*
23 *mittee were received as information for the delegates.*

24 25 **2024 Interim Report of the Committee**

26 27 **Scriptural Foundation**

28 29 *The Biblical Call and Our Responsibility for Providing Access*

30 “Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher. They were trying to
31 bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but, finding no way to bring him in be-
32 cause of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down on the stretcher
33 through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.” Luke 5:18-19

34 35 *The Importance of Including All Members of the Body*

36 “Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of
37 services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same
38 God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation
39 of the Spirit for the common good.” 1 Cor 12:4-7

40 41 *Guidance for Living in Good Relationship with One Another*

42 “Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with com-
43 passion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and,
44 if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord
45 has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with
46 love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Colossians 3:12-14

I. Charge from Annual Conference to the Committee	1
	2
To examine the query’s theological, philosophical, and practical implications along with a feasibility study.	3
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II. Relevant Annual Conference Resolutions and Statements	6
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<i>1994 Americans with Disabilities Act Resolution</i>	8
“We petition Annual Conference to consider accepting the Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines for the Church of the Brethren and to urge our churches and institutions to begin study and implementation thereof, exempted those entities that would face “undue hardship” in attempting to comply with the act; and we suggest that the development of a plan to implement ADA throughout the denomination be referred to the Association of Brethren Caregivers.”	9
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<i>2006 Commitment of Accessibility and Inclusion Resolution</i>	16
“We petition the Annual Conference to urge each congregation, agency, institution, facility, and gathering of the Church of the Brethren to make a new commitment to enable all people to participate fully in all ministries of the Church of the Brethren. Furthermore, we ask organizations and event planners:	17
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• To work to ensure that all may worship, serve, be served, learn, and grow in the presence of God as valued members of the Christian community.	21
	22
• To examine barriers, both physical and attitudinal, that prevent people with disabilities from living fully in church community and work to rectify these situations.	23
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• To commit that all existing and future denominational office sites be modified or designed to follow the guidelines of the ADA.”	26
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<i>2008 Resolution Urging Forbearance</i>	29
See Section V	30
	31
<i>2018 Vision for a Global Church of the Brethren Statement</i>	32
“The Church of the Brethren has long embraced the philosophy of the indigenous church, and continues to do so, seeking to allow the gospel to take root in culturally appropriate forms that arise from the people’s own insights and experiences.	33
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As we progress toward participation in a Global Church of the Brethren, the Church of the Brethren in the United States is challenged to increase the intercultural competency of its leaders, districts, congregations, and members.”	37
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III. Input from Annual Conference Attendees	41
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The committee received input from Annual Conference attendees (2021, 2022, and 2023) and initiated an online survey and focus groups in 2023.	43
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	45
We listened carefully to members of the Church of the Brethren to hear their	46

1 thoughts about why we gather together in district, regional, or denominational
2 gatherings; what our values are in gathering; what barriers to participation they
3 perceive; what concerns they had about gathering in person and/or online; what
4 solutions they could offer; and what their hope was for future gatherings. These
5 are not our recommendations but a summation of what we heard:
6

7 **A. Why we gather**

- 8
- 9 • To experience the Body of Christ in a larger way, get a sense of the wider
10 church and its diversity.
- 11 • To build relationships, connect beyond local congregations, share different
12 perspectives, and foster a sense of shared humanity.
- 13 • To help articulate our faith, deepen our understanding of our Brethren iden-
14 tity, and better understand what it means to follow Jesus.
- 15 • To worship together.
- 16 • To discern the mind of Christ together as we make decisions about polity
17 and policy.
- 18 • To provide an opportunity for continuing education - particularly for pastors
19 and other leaders.
- 20 • To see friends and make new friends.
- 21

22 **B. Our values as we gather**

- 23
- 24 • Priesthood of All Believers
25 Anyone can come to the microphone to speak. Everyone's voice is valued.
- 26 • Community
27 Community is at our core. It's central to the way we do church. We can't
28 separate our relatedness with God from our relatedness with each other.
- 29 • We Find the Holy Spirit in Community
30 We seek the Spirit together as a diverse Body. We gather, hoping to hear a
31 word from the Spirit through one another. We learn from a variety of
32 voices that can enhance, correct, and strengthen one another's witness.
- 33 • Body of Christ
34 We honor each member of the Body and see them as essential to our
35 wholeness.
- 36 • Peace
37 We have guidelines for sacred sharing. We treat each other with respect.
38 We practice forbearance.
- 39 • Simplicity
40 Our gatherings are not fancy or flashy.
- 41 • Service
42 We volunteer at large church gatherings, do service projects together and
43 contribute to the host community.
- 44 • Faith Formation
45 Christ is at the center of our gatherings. We interpret scripture together.
46 We gather for spiritual growth in community. We help each other learn to

- use faith-based language and articulate our faith. We practice discipleship and community formation. 1
2
- Human Thriving 3
 - We want people and communities to flourish. We encourage each other. 4
 - We build each other up. 5
- Humility 6
 - We have humility. “Authority is to be implemented with respect for individual conscience, openness to new light, acceptance of criticism, and the willingness to allow decisions to persuade on the basis of their intrinsic merit.” – focus group member 7
8
9
- Accountability 11
 - We are accountable to one another and to God. 12
- We Follow Jesus 13
 - Loving God with Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength 14
 - Loving Neighbors 15
 - Loving Enemies 16

C. Barriers to participation

Attitudinal barriers

- Theological differences 21
 - People with various theological perspectives feel their perspective is not welcome or valued. 22
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 - People with various theological perspectives feel that their interpretation of scripture is not respected, nor is their integrity in interpretation acknowledged. 24
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 - Some congregations and districts feel in conflict with the denomination theologically. 27
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 - Differences in dress and worship customs. 29
 - Many comments about centering Christ, focusing on Jesus, following the Bible, having scripture as our foundation, and being more like the early Church; with differing opinions about what that means. 30
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33
- Unwelcoming and/or dismissive attitudes toward people who are: 34
 - Not white. 35
 - Non-English speaking. 36
 - Neurodivergent (mental illness, autism, ADHD, intellectual disability). 37
 - Physically disabled. 38
 - Women. 39
 - Newcomers. 40
 - Single. 41
 - LGBTQ (It is noted that many people who are LGBTQ not only feel unwelcome but feel unsafe.) 42
43
 - From different political viewpoints. 44
 - Anxious about being with people who have been harmful to them in previous gatherings. 45
46

1 **Business Process**

- 2 • Opaque process that is difficult to grasp for new delegates.
- 3 • Antiquated language. For example, "Standing Committee" doesn't describe
- 4 their function for the average person.
- 5 • There could be a better process than Robert's Rules for discerning the mind
- 6 of Christ.
- 7 • There is a political mindset of competition and wanting to "win."
- 8 • Lengthy reports and ineffective use of business time. Re-examine the balance
- 9 between necessary organizational business and discussion of mission pri-
- 10 orities.
- 11 • Wordsmithing takes too much of our time.
- 12 • Overscheduling the day and week. How do we find the balance between car-
- 13 ing for all that needs to be done and also allowing space and time for nur-
- 14 turing relationships?
- 15 • Annual Conference dominated by the same people and disconnected from
- 16 the people in the pews.
- 17 • Language barriers at tables during table talk.
- 18 • 400+ non-delegates not in the conversation.

19
20 **Finance**

- 21 • Multiple expenses related to travel (airfare, gas, hotel, food).
- 22 • Lack of paid time to attend for pastors (especially for the 77% that are part-
- 23 time or bi-vocational).
- 24 • Lack of vacation time.
- 25 • What the Brethren are willing and able to pay for registration has not kept
- 26 up with the increase in the cost of providing AC.
- 27 • The registration fee necessary to cover the expense of holding AC is no longer
- 28 feasible for the average person. Average wage earnings have not increased
- 29 to meet the growing costs.
- 30 • Some congregations possess insufficient resources to send a delegate.
- 31 • Largely represented at Annual Conference by those who can afford to attend,
- 32 leading to unequal representation.
- 33 • Having to pay to listen to business.

34
35 **Physical Barriers**

- 36 • Compromised immunity
- 37 • Mobility
 - 38 - Large venues that require large amounts of walking; proximity of hotels
 - 39 to the meeting spaces.
 - 40 - Distance to ramps for wheelchairs.
 - 41 - Lack of space between tables and a clear path to microphones.
 - 42 - Lack of access to food services.
- 43 • Sight
- 44 • Hearing
- 45 • Insufficient support because of inadequate closed captioning services
- 46 • Lack of closed captioning for video presentations.

• Lack of ASL interpreters.	1
• Volume/acoustics in large crowds can make hearing difficult.	2
• Environment unfriendly to those with sensory challenges (noise, lighting, scent/chemical).	3 4
• Locations intimidating to or unsafe for people of color (Lake Junaluska or Fort Collins).	5 6 7
Other Barriers	8
• Environmental Toll (for in-person gatherings)	9
• The timing of conferences often conflicts with a major holiday.	10
• Travel restrictions experienced by international guests, particularly those related to more strict visa policies.	11 12 13
D. Online and Hybrid Meeting Barriers	14 15
Technological Barriers	16
• Providing Tech	17
- High cost of internet access (e.g., \$55,000 in Omaha).	18
- Cost of a tech team.	19
- The cost for a hybrid gathering includes higher tech costs coupled with increased costs due to lower in-person participation.	20 21
- More demand for videos, etc. (more staff time).	22
- There are more issues with copyright permissions.	23
• Using Tech (Participants)	24
- Cyber security issues.	25
- Lack of access to high-speed internet.	26
- Difficulty streaming conference.	27
- Inability to navigate the technology.	28
- Chat can be distracting, especially during worship.	29
- Screen time causes eye fatigue.	30
• Struggling to follow polity that was created in a pre-technology era.	31 32
The Challenge of Creating Community through Virtual Participation	33
• Table talk (having to talk to each other, getting to know one another, not just sitting with people you know) that includes virtual and in-person participants together is practically impossible. This emerged as a top concern.	34 35 36
• Imbalance of power - more attention to people in the room than to people online in hybrid.	37 38
• Risk of creating two communities with a hybrid meeting form.	39
• We could lose the sense of worship together as “the work of the people.”	40
• Less casual conversation before and after business sessions.	41
• There are fewer opportunities for connecting with friends.	42
• Difficulty sharing the exhibit hall digitally.	43
• It is hard for some people to feel fully included online.	44
• More challenges for communication and potential for misunderstanding.	45
• It would be more difficult to witness to the host city.	46

- 1 • Inability to sing together online.
- 2 • May feel more transactional than relational.
- 3 • Would the convenience of virtual participation eventually end the desire to
- 4 meet in person?
- 5 • Lack of embodiment – handshakes, hugs, eating together, being “eyeball to
- 6 eyeball.”

7

8 **Attitudes and Behavior Online**

- 9 • Easier to demonize and dehumanize.
- 10 • Concern about online bullying.
- 11 • It is harder to stay engaged online. Person not focused on the task at hand
- 12 if they can turn off their screen.
- 13 • How do we ensure that someone listens to the conversation and doesn't just
- 14 show up to vote?

15

16 **Difficulty in anticipating in-person attendance**

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18 **E. Meeting Virtually Assists:**

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- 20 • People who have issues with mobility, neurodivergence, or expense.
- 21 • People who are fatigued or have small children can participate even after re-
- 22 turning to their hotel room.
- 23 • People in nursing homes or other group home settings.
- 24 • People are unable to travel to meet for various reasons.
- 25 • Congregations who can't afford travel expenses.
- 26 • People who are ill.

27

28 **F. Affirmations for Online and Hybrid**

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- 30 • Had a better view of leaders and people speaking.
- 31 • Appreciated viewing on multiple platforms (Zoom, Livestream, YouTube).
- 32 • Appreciation for chat.
- 33 • Appreciation for multiple cameras.
- 34 • No room size restrictions for equipping sessions.
- 35 • People accustomed to online meetings felt more able to connect with others
- 36 virtually.

37

38 **G. Proposed solutions**

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40 **Disability Accessibility**

- 41 • Preview site and hotel for accessibility. Make sure buildings are accessible
- 42 and elevators are convenient.
- 43 • Reserve a block of accessible hotel rooms.
- 44 • Golf carts to transport people.
- 45 • Make sure leadership space is accessible (i.e., access to the platform stage).
- 46 • Provide a quiet room/sensory room.

• Audio assistive devices that feed directly into hearing aids.	1
• A team of volunteers to provide assistance, including pushing wheelchairs.	2
• Braille conference book or digital conference book for screen readers.	3
• Large-print bulletins.	4
• Ask about disability concerns as a part of the registration process.	5
• Read the words on the screen for people who are blind or sight-impaired.	6
• Reserve tables at the edge of the delegate area for those with mobility issues.	7
• Access to a microphone for those with mobility issues.	8
• Closed captioning.	9
• Accessible seating for people who are large.	10
• Better publicize disability accommodations.	11
• More time between scheduled events.	12
	13
Changing Attitudes	14
• Expand diversity, equity, and inclusion	15
• Be more intentional and work harder at intercultural work.	16
• Deeper listening, patience, forbearance, and discernment of the mind of Christ together over as much time as it takes (instead of trying to exercise power over one another).	17 18 19
• Lift up the things we hold in common.	20
• Apply Accountability and Conduct Guidelines uniformly for both online (including chat) and in-person participants.	21 22
• Focus on good things happening.	23
• Release power and privilege.	24
• Seek out information about and connection with communities of color in the neighborhood of conferences.	25 26
• Help new people feel connected.	27
• Real-time language interpretation in business and worship.	28
• Interpretation equipment available at meal events.	29
• Prioritize the needs of those on the margins.	30
	31
Business	32
• Examine business processes for possible revision.	33
• Communicate transparently about business processes so people can understand them better.	34 35
• Hybrid: The week before would be for reports and non-action items online. Action items in person.	36 37
• More worship, less business	38
• Text motions to the secretary to speed up the process.	39
• Voting with clickers in person and online. Speedier. Fewer tellers are needed. No re-voting by a different method. Greater precision in voting numbers recorded.	40 41 42 43
	44
Expense	44
• Grants for more ministers to attend	45
• Sliding scale for exhibit booths based on an organization's annual budget.	46

- 1 • Travel scholarships, AC in person every two years. An alternative equipping
- 2 event that is virtual in alternate years.
- 3 • More affordable venues, e.g., college campuses or camps.
- 4 • Ask for sponsorships (gold, silver, platinum)
- 5 • Make AC shorter.
- 6 • If alternating years in-person and online, could make money for in-person
- 7 conference in alternate years.
- 8 • Subsidize minority groups and financially challenged groups to increase di-
- 9 versity.

10

11 **Frequency**

- 12 • Reduce frequency to every other year.
- 13 • Alternate virtual and in-person every other year.
- 14 • Three-year rotation: hubs to meet in different areas year 1, online year 2, all
- 15 together year 3.
- 16 • Alternate with NOAC every other year.

17

18 **Location**

- 19 • Meeting at Brethren camps or colleges (may be too small, may not be less
- 20 expensive, may not have good disability access, not always convenient for
- 21 those across the country).
- 22 • Have two electronically linked conferences in two different geographic lo-
- 23 cations.
- 24 • Cluster gatherings, especially for rural areas with insufficient internet band-
- 25 width to support full participation.
- 26 • Select a single location near a significant air traffic hub and somewhere close
- 27 to the national center, perhaps in the Chicago area. This makes travel easier
- 28 and is in the Central time zone which helps lessen the disadvantage for
- 29 those in the Mountain and Pacific time zones. Planning would be more pre-
- 30 dictable.
- 31 • Rotate to West Coast.

32

33 **Support**

- 34 • Information Centers for orientation and support, online and in-person.
- 35 • Daycare for kids. Free childcare.
- 36 • Space to put your feet up and rest.
- 37 • Safe space for affinity groups to find support.

38

39 **Leadership**

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- 41 • Call more diverse leadership:
 - 42 - Younger people
 - 43 - People with disabilities
 - 44 - LGTBQ people
 - 45 - Women
 - 46 - People of color

Technology	1
• Regional hubs (at congregations, camps, Brethren homes, colleges/seminaries).	2
• Technology scholarships/grants (Faith in Action fund).	3
• Tech support team available by phone.	4
• Online voting/delegate participation.	5
• Virtual tours of exhibits and displays.	6
• Consider moving away from hard media formats (DVD) for the wrap up video and toward a streaming version.	7 8
• Breakout rooms for virtual attendees, not just for business purposes but also as a tool to support virtual community building.	9 10
• Mic participants who are in the room for equipping sessions when they speak, so that they can be heard online.	11 12
• Use phone and cast to a TV for viewing and participation without a computer.	13 14 15
Suggestions for Hybrid	16
• Account for the difference in the presence and power of people attending online.	17 18
- Have proxies or couriers – people willing to represent online participants on the conference floor at the mic.	19 20
- Put online participants on the screen when they are talking.	21
- Develop better ways to get input and feedback from online participants.	22
- Equalize participation from online participants and people in the room, including speaking at the mic and voting.	23 24
• An app with a QR code for surveying/getting feedback from people in the room and online.	25 26
• Work intentionally at creating one community from people online and in the room.	27 28
• Work intentionally at facilitating online table talk.	29
• Increase registration costs for online participants (because they don't need to pay for travel, and there are greater associated tech costs to support virtual participation).	30 31 32
	33
H. Hopes	34
	35
• Focus on the work – Jesus in the Neighborhood.	36
• Hope in Jesus and call to unity.	37
• Hope in obedience/discipleship.	38
• Hopeful that God is moving.	39
• Hope of our historical importance, in our DNA.	40
• Resurrection of new life; with God, all things are possible.	41
• Gather in faith rather than around issues.	42
• Respect and love others who have differing interpretations of our core values.	43
• Connect across distances like the early Church (internet instead of letters) Paul communicated through letters to a dispersed church. They gathered at the Jerusalem Council to solve problems.	44 45 46

- 1 • The theological underpinnings of a virtual meeting do exist; that is to say,
2 we trust the spirit to work where people are.
- 3 • Historically, Brethren were content to disagree vociferously but think of
4 themselves as a family despite the deeply held differences.
5

6 **IV. Recommendations from the Doing Annual Conference Differently** 7 **Committee**

8
9 In 2022, the Doing Annual Conference Differently Committee made recom-
10 mendations for changing the way that we do Annual Conference. Some of these
11 recommendations are helpful as we consider breaking down barriers to partici-
12 pation in larger church gatherings.
13

14 **A. Creating Relationship**

- 15
- 16 • Promote round-table interactions during worship.
- 17 • Facilitate round-table sharing during business, including the sharing of stories.
- 18 • Shift the evening time after worship to a relationship-building focus.
- 19 • Incorporate an intergenerational-friendly, all-conference meal event into
20 registration cost and schedule.
- 21 • Provide opportunities for intergenerational interactions.
- 22 • Be intentional with creating spaces for conversation and interaction (like
23 the hospitality area).
24

25 **B. Business**

- 26
- 27 • Schedule
- 28 • Shorten agenda. Consider which parts of the business are necessary.
- 29 • Find more meaningful ways to encourage table conversation around busi-
30 ness items.
- 31 • Query Process - assess the strengths and weaknesses of the query process,
32 which, many believe, has contributed to increased division and animosity
33 in our denomination.
34

35 **C. Equity and Inclusion**

- 36
- 37 • Include persons from diverse backgrounds in worship planning and leader-
38 ship.
- 39 • Vary worship service formats.
- 40 • Include multiple languages in worship.
- 41 • Use images and media that reflect human diversity in worship. Include more
42 diversity in conference leadership (race, gender, ethnicity, geography).
- 43 • A structured ballot with a schedule for including those who are usually ex-
44 cluded from leadership.
- 45 • The Program and Arrangements Committee should consider the reputation or
46 history of a host city on issues of race, justice, and equality and have conversa-

tions with Intercultural Ministries about a city before choosing a location.	1
• Consider Accessibility to Families (cost, schedule, programming).	2
	3
V. Reminders of Existing Policies and Practices that Provide Guidelines for Gathering and Interacting with One Another	4
	5
	6
• Annual Conference Booklet guidelines for behavior and addressing the body from the Conference floor.	7
	8
• The official Church of the Brethren Facebook page guidelines for posts and comments.	9
	10
• The Annual Conference Statement of 2008 - " <i>Urging Forbearance</i> "	11
"We find ourselves in a world where people are driven apart by deep differences. These divisions seep into the church, pitting us against one another in action and language. Yet God has entrusted us with a ministry of reconciliation.	12
	13
	14
"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, NRSV)	15
	16
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Therefore, as we celebrate our 300th anniversary, be it resolved:	21
	22
- that we commit ourselves to forbearance which recognizes and respects differences of opinion and differing degrees of spiritual insight. We will show deference in disputable matters (Romans 14:1) while practicing prayerful study and conversation in core beliefs;	23
	24
	25
	26
- that we agree to see our differences, not as discord, but as the blessing which can come when we openly discuss our disagreements, address our conflicts, and share our faith perspectives;	27
	28
	29
- that, with our forebears, we continue to treasure both faithfulness to truth and openness to new light;	30
	31
- In all circumstances, we will embrace our commitment to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ as equally important to our other theological beliefs (1 Corinthians 13:1-8; Ephesians 4:32);	32
	33
	34
- that we pledge ourselves on matters where we are not of one mind to let the Holy Spirit draw us together to be of one heart."	35
	36
	37
• The Annual Conference Statement of 1998 - " <i>The New Testament as our Rule of Faith and Practice</i> "	38
	39
"Understanding that the Spirit speaks through the gathered church requires humility in speech and an interest in hearing whatever truth may be revealed in the words of each member.	40
	41
	42
- We suggest a more courteous and modest approach to Annual Conference speech making. Such an approach includes: taking the time to listen to others, softening offensive or inflammatory remarks, and exercising self-restraint in the number of times we choose to speak.	43
	44
	45
	46

- 1 - We suggest a review of the way we legislate microphone appearances. Our
 2 present practice encourages prepared speeches spoken in turn rather than
 3 an open interchange of ideas. What we hear is a series of monologues. It
 4 is almost impossible to respond directly to another's speech.
- 5 - A peaceful and loving spirit requires a change in our attitude about An-
 6 nual Conference business. We should cease thinking of Annual Confer-
 7 ence as a political battleground where we strive for the victory of our own
 8 opinion and demean the character or position of a sister or brother. A
 9 win/lose mentality does not fit historic or contemporary understandings
 10 of our affirmation. While we probably cannot go back to decisions by
 11 unanimous consent, we should retain some of its charitable spirit in our
 12 own manner of speaking and listening to one another.
- 13 - We suggest a review of our rules for conducting business. Perhaps we
 14 should consider a return to the Annual Conference procedure in effect
 15 from the 1880s until 1960 that required a 2/3 majority to pass answers
 16 and reports responding to queries. Such a procedure would build a
 17 greater trust that the actions represent the mind of the community of
 18 faith, and a greater likelihood that they would be taken seriously.
- 19 - It is possible that we are trying to speak exhaustively on too many issues.
 20 The combination of faith and practice should caution us not to speak
 21 about issues for which we have little priority in either time or money.
 22 Our witness is sadly tarnished when we make pronouncements without
 23 strong commitment and genuine follow through.
- 24 - All Annual Conference concerns should be examined by careful New Tes-
 25 tament study before reaching query status, and responses to the queries
 26 should be grounded in the New Testament. Some concerns require
 27 lengthy and careful background study; others, however, can be answered
 28 more simply and directly than we have recently practiced."
- 29
- 30 • The Annual Conference Statement of 1979 - "*Biblical Inspiration and Au-*
 31 *thority*"
 32 "Christian love requires:
- 33 - that we acknowledge the integrity and worth of those brothers and sisters
 34 with whom we cannot totally agree.
- 35 - that we make every effort to understand one another by keeping lines of
 36 communication open, by listening to, hearing, and responding to our
 37 sisters/brothers.
- 38 - that we be willing to test our perceptions and understandings with the
 39 gathered church.
- 40 - that we be open to the counsel of our brothers and sisters.
- 41 - that we behave in ways that build up the church.
- 42 - that we be obedient to Jesus Christ.
- 43 - that we not attempt to gloss over our differences, but that we face them
 44 honestly and work at resolving them "with patience, forbearing one an-
 45 other in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of
 46 peace" (Eph. 4:2-3).

- that we hold before us the goal of “being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2).”

VI. Next Steps

The Breaking Down Barriers Study Committee requests that the Annual Conference extend their term of the assignment one additional year to 2025. This would provide time for the required feasibility study to examine the question, “What is possible?” and provide a final report and recommendations.

Respectfully submitted to the Standing Committee of the Annual Conference on February 1, 2024.

The Study Committee Members

Jeanne Davies, recorder

Brandon Grady

Dan Poole, chair