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Brethren Volunteer Service – Statement on racism

As a ministry of the Church of the Brethren, BVS has been the hands and feet of Jesus by advocating justice, working for peace, serving human need, and caring for creation for more than 70 years. The horrific recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and a long list of others before them, has brought further attention to the oppression of and violence towards our black brothers and sisters and demands that we continue to be Christ's hand and feet by advocating justice today. BVS stands firmly that Black lives matter and that racism is sin.

As a BVS community, how are we using our voices to advocate justice in this time?

We confess that we have been silent during times that marginalized communities have suffered and that our silence has made us complicit in giving power to white oppression. We repent of these sins and commit to increasing our listening, education, and dialogue about anti-racism. While working to understand how we perpetuate systemic racism, we will purposefully create space to amplify black and brown voices during our orientations and in our office as a staff. Micah 6:8 says, 'And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' May it be so.

The above statement was released on June 19, 2020. In November of 2020, BVS was asked to take the statement down temporarily because some of the language was offensive to members of the Church of the Brethren. In the spirit of the 2009 Annual Conference statement "A Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues," BVS staff took time to work at mutual understanding, doing much research, listening, and learning. After reviewing Annual Conference statements, referencing the newly adopted Mission and Ministry Board Strategic Plan, and in light of events that have occurred since its initial release, BVS staff feels the need to restate its stance on racism and recommit itself to working towards healing racism.

Brethren Volunteer Service has been devoted to peace witness for over 70 years. According to the 1991 Annual Conference statement "Peacemaking: The Calling of God's People in History," "[t]housands of today's Brethren point to their BVS experiences as turning points in their lives." The ideas of what should be included in peace witness have changed since 1948, with the same 1991 statement stating that "[o]ver time, the church grew in its understanding of peace. Peace is not only the opposite of war, it is the presence of justice in a world where pervasive and systemic injustice prohibits peace." That same 1991 statement states that our "role as communities of God's peace may include...raising prophetic voices that challenge injustice." Based on this call from the 1991 statement, along with the 1977 Annual Conference statement "Justice and Nonviolence" call to "become aware of the rampant injustice and subtle hidden violence in today's world, examine our own involvement, and identify non-violently with the oppressed and suffering," BVS recognizes the importance of stating firmly that Black lives matter and that racism is sin.

Based on 2 Chronicles 7:14, we are called to humble ourselves, and "pray and seek [God's] face and turn from [our] wicked ways." The 2009 revision of the Annual Conference statement "A Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues" provides guidance on how to engage with each other when there are "deep differences among us" to "work for mutual understanding." We are called to understand our role in racism through the 1991 Annual Conference "Report of [the] Committee on Brethren and Black Americans," particularly the call to "make strong commitments" when inequity is discovered and to "stand in solidarity with [B]lack Americans." The 2007 Annual Conference statement "Separate No More" calls on Annual Conference agencies to require "intercultural orientation/education for staff and program volunteers" and to "[e]stablish a discernment process during hiring which considers candidates' intercultural competence," both of which BVS recommits to in the above statement.