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Upcoming orientations:

- Unit #337
July 27- August 4, 2025
Camp Colorado, Sedalia, CO
- Unit #338
September 10-18, 2025
Camp Mardela, Denton, MD

By the numbers:

- Active volunteers: 27
20 in the United States
5 in Europe
2 in Asia
- Active projects: 58
37 in the United States
8 in Europe
6 in Latin America
3 in Asia
4 in Africa

**Note: Not all active projects are accepting volunteers at any given time.*

The contributions in this biannual newsletter come from current and former BVS volunteers, as well as FaithX short-term service trip participants. Our hope is that this provides a glimpse into the experiences and lives of our volunteers as they share about their BVS and FaithX service, and their journeys of faith. For more regular updates, sign up for the BVS monthly e-newsletter at www.brethren.org/bvs/updates.

The Volunteer

Sharing God's love through acts of service

Living with Purpose

Meet our New Volunteers

Orientation units 335 and 336 took place in summer and fall of 2024, providing a total of 27 volunteers with training and preparation for service.

Unit 335, held July 28-August 5 at Camp Colorado in Sedalia, Colorado, included 12 volunteers from the US and Germany. Five German volunteers came from EIRENE, our long-time partner organization in Germany. Five volunteers came from Church of the Brethren congregations.

Unit 336, held September 17-25 at Camp Brethren Heights in Rodney, Michigan, brought 14 volunteers together from the US, France, Lesotho, and Germany. Five of the volunteers came via EIRENE, one not pictured. Six volunteers were connected to the Church of the Brethren.

Volunteers are now serving at projects in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Oregon, Virginia, Washington D.C., Northern Ireland, and Japan. These placements include Church of the Brethren related projects at Brethren Disaster Ministries, Camp Mardela, FaithX, Highland Park Elementary, the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy, and San Diego Church of the Brethren.

Please hold our volunteers in prayer as they serve, learn, and grow this year. Upcoming BVS orientation dates have been set and will take place in summer and fall of 2025.



Top: Unit 335 - orientation at Camp Colorado.

Bottom: Unit 336 - orientation at Camp Brethren Heights.



Volunteering in Northern Ireland by Isabel Kruse

Every morning, I wake up to the sounds of the ocean lapping on the beach. At work, I look out over the Irish Sea and monitor the tides changing, in and out. I walk down from work each night with Slieve Donard, the tallest mountain in Northern Ireland, at my back.

I work at Greenhill YMCA in the tiny town of Newcastle, Northern Ireland. When I first came to Greenhill, I had no idea what to expect. BVS hasn't had a volunteer go to Greenhill for many years, so I was a guinea pig. I was apprehensive when I first arrived, not knowing what the placement would be like. However, volunteering here has been one of the best decisions I've made.

I am an outdoor instructor at the YMCA, leading groups of children and adults on outdoor activities. In my three months at Greenhill, I have learned a lot about outdoor activities. I know how to lead an archery session, set up a Grigri and belay master for rock climbing, and run about 25 different initiative games for groups. However, I am most grateful for the stories I've learned from the people I am surrounded by.

I live in a house, called Glenada, with 25 other volunteers from nine different countries. I have met people from countries I've never had an opportunity to visit, like Ghana, South Korea, and Morocco. Each day, I practice my Spanish, German, and French while listening to my friends. I observe people cooking food from their countries, and I learn through osmosis. We trade stories of our upbringings and different cultural experiences. My supervisors and trainers at work are from Northern Ireland. During our weekly sports day and crochet club, I learn about their upbringings and university experiences. I am especially grateful for Greenhill's sponsorship of a Northern Ireland Cultural Group, which takes us on monthly excursions. We have attended a Belfast Giants Ice Hockey Game, a peace-building dialogue between a former IRA member and the daughter of a British member of parliament he killed, a Belfast vs. Belarus football match, and a speech from Ulster Defence Regiment members about the effects of the Troubles on their current lives. Through these experiences, I have connected with the individuals that I work and live with, but I have also gained a deeper understanding of the society that I am living in for the next year.

During the remainder of my time at Greenhill, I look forward to growing my skills in outdoor activities and my confidence in working with groups of children. I hope to keep learning about the history of Northern Ireland and explore the island, while spending quality time with my housemates and coworkers. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to live and work at Greenhill for the rest of the year, and I am so happy with my decision to serve here!

Isabel Kruse is from Huntingdon, PA. She is serving at Greenhill YMCA in Northern Ireland. Isabel is a recent graduate from Juniata College. She is a member of BVS Unit 335 and wrote this reflection in November after three months at her service placement.



Living with Purpose *by Nate Will*

Living with purpose is one of the most important aspects of my life.

The things that are most important to me while living with purpose are helping others and helping the world. The FaithX trips that I have joined in Portland, Oregon and Knoxville, Tennessee have been amazing experiences that have made this purpose clearer in my life. These trips provided an opportunity for me to make a meaningful impact on local communities.

My most recent Faith X trip to Knoxville was extremely rewarding. We volunteered at the Knoxville Dream Center where we helped pack over 6,500 bags of school supplies for students. This was incredibly impactful to me, because as a student myself I know how nice it is to have new supplies for the upcoming school year. Knowing that we were able to help so many kids get these supplies was uplifting and was a key example to me of what living with purpose looks like, and what I can do in my life to live purposefully.

On both my FaithX trips in Knoxville and Portland, I participated in programs that directly served the unhoused population. Serving at the soup kitchen in Portland was eye-opening for me because I realized that these folks are not just homeless people, but people who have families, jobs, and hobbies, and are trying to live their lives as best as they can. I spent time talking with another volunteer who had once been a client of the soup kitchen himself. In Knoxville we volunteered one night at Under the Bridge where we served a meal and handed out clothing under a highway overpass. Some volunteers at this event have been serving at Under the Bridge for over 20 years, and it was interesting to see them interacting with the guests, calling them by name and just talking to them as friends. One of the other youth in my church group sat at the Prayer Table and talked and listened to folks, because sometimes that's all that is needed - just someone to talk to.

FaithX trips have also been impactful because I've gotten to see other parts of the country and spend time with the youth and advisors from my church. You get to know people well on a cross-country flight or a 10-hour van ride! Having purpose allows me to live a fulfilling life that I am proud of, and I know I can have a positive impact on others and the world around me.

Nate Will is in 11th grade and attends University Baptist and Brethren Church in State College, PA.



Week-long Service Trips for All Ages

In addition to longer-term volunteer opportunities, BVS also offers short-term service trips for all ages through FaithX.



This year, FaithX will offer an older adult trip to Camp Ithiel near Orlando, Florida on March 2-7, 2025 (registration is open for this trip). Service trips for junior high and senior high youth, adults of all ages, and families will follow in summer 2025.

The full FaithX service trip schedule:

Older Adult

March 2-7: Gotha, Florida (Camp Ithiel)

Junior High

June 8-12: Richmond, Virginia

July 8-12: University Park, Maryland

Senior High

June 15-21: Portland, Oregon

July 13-19: Little Rock, Arkansas (Ferncliff Camp)

Junior and Senior High

June 8-13: Keezletown, Virginia (Brethren Woods Camp)

June 24-29: South Bend, Indiana

July 6-10: Winston-Salem, North Carolina

July 20-25: Boston, Massachusetts

Adult

June 1-7: Cle Elum, Washington (Camp Koinonia)

July 13-20: Uganda

Family

July 25-27: Denton, Maryland (Camp Mardela)



Registration for FaithX opens on Wednesday, January 8, 2025, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern time at www.brethren.org/faithx/registration.

Living with Purpose: My Journey *by Keke Phooko*

I was born into a Christian family of five in a small village in Mohale's Hoek district, Lesotho. Growing up, I dreamt of becoming a nurse, but my high school grades, particularly in math and English, redirected me to Agriculture College. Initially, I was disappointed, but during my time there, I discovered a new passion: the environment and natural resources.

After college, I searched for work and came across Growing Nations Trust, an organization practicing "Farming God's Way", or conservation agriculture. The founder told me, "If you're here for money, this is not the place. But if you want something that will benefit you in the future, you're in the right place." His words didn't make sense to me then, but I decided to volunteer for a year, despite my doubts. Along with others, I was trained in servant leadership, agriculture, and transformational development. It was here that I found my purpose: to care for both people and the environment.

A year later, a Canadian couple visiting Growing Nations Trust introduced us to an exchange program. I applied, and soon, I was in Canada for another year of volunteering.

It was my first time outside of Lesotho, and the culture shock was immense. I traveled across Canada giving presentations at schools, churches, and community events, sharing stories of life in Lesotho and how we are tackling climate change and poverty through sustainable agriculture.



Keke Unit #336 (left) on-site at BDM location in Kentucky

When I returned to Lesotho, I continued working with Growing Nations Trust, training farmers and demonstrating conservation practices on a rented field. Later, I bought a small farm in Berea district to deepen my commitment to agriculture and community development.

Over the years, I've been blessed with opportunities to serve. I volunteered with the Mennonite Central Committee in the Southern Africa region based in Zimbabwe, facilitating a regional exchange program for young adults focusing on conservation agriculture, community development, and peacebuilding. I also volunteered in the US as a caregiver for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Currently, I serve with Brethren Disaster Ministries through Brethren Volunteer Service.

Looking back, I wish I had started traveling earlier. The world is full of learning opportunities, and I

believe in the two-way process of giving and receiving. While I love traveling, my heart remains with my farm and my community where I aim to empower young women and girls in my community. I hope to help them build confidence and grow into the strong women that they are meant to be.

Through all my experiences, I've learned that living with purpose is about serving others, protecting our environment, and using what we learn to make a lasting impact. I hope to inspire others to follow this path, wherever it leads them.



Keke (Unit 336) is one of four BVS volunteers serving within the Church of the Brethren General Offices. Cornelius Raff and Hannah Nelson serve at the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy in Washington D.C., and Rachel Johnson serves with FaithX at the BVS office in Elgin, Illinois. Keke's reflection was written after two months of service with Brethren Disaster Ministries, where she is a volunteer at the disaster response site in Kentucky.



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