



Upcoming Orientations:

- Unit #339
July 27-August 4, 2026
Inspiration Hills Camp – Ohio
- Unit #340
September 15-23, 2026
Camp Emmaus – Illinois

Application Deadlines:

- Early Enrollment: February 26th
- Summer Orientation: May 20th
- Fall Orientation: June 24th

Volunteer Stats:

- Active volunteers: 25
15 in the United States
3 in Europe
3 in Asia
4 pending visas

New Projects:

- Food for Greater Elgin, a food pantry that serves Elgin, IL
- East Belfast Mission and Larder working with food justice in Belfast, N. Ireland

May we raise children who love the unloved things

*May we raise children
who love the unloved things
– the dandelion, the worms
& spiderlings.
Children who sense
the rose needs the thorn
& run into rainswept days
the same way they turn towards sun...*

*And when they're grown &
someone has to speak for those
who have no voice
may they draw upon that
wilder bond, those days of
tending tender things
and be the ones.*

– Poem by Nicolette Sowder

The Volunteer

Sharing God's love through acts of service

Love the Unloved Things

Rachel Johnson, Unit 335 – National Youth Conference Coordinator

In the past year and a half, I have had the joy of serving through Brethren Volunteer Service. What started off as just a gap year and break from classroom learning has given me so many wonderful opportunities to grow as a person, travel, and meet many new people. My original plan to serve in BVS for only one year has now also turned into two years – spending my first year in the Church of the Brethren FaithX office, and now my second year as the Church of the Brethren National Youth Conference (NYC) Coordinator. While I am very much enjoying my time in BVS, there are still some moments that are challenging or less exciting than others.

“It is comforting to know that I am a small part of something bigger.”



If someone was to shadow me in my role as 2026 NYC Coordinator, it might not look like the most exciting job. Much of my day consists of sitting at a desk – sending emails, making phone calls, researching what is possible for NYC 2026, and lots and lots of meetings. To someone who has not had this role before, it can seem a little anticlimactic. But through all of the emails I send and phone calls I receive, I get to meet tons of new people, share my passion for my role, and help excitement for NYC grow. When I research what is possible for NYC 2026, I get to dream big about all the possibilities and ways that NYC can be an impactful experience for youth. When I am sitting in meeting after meeting, I know that these are the very people who help make NYC the best experience it can be for youth. And pretty quickly the mundane and less exciting tasks start to become more and more exciting. They are all small parts of a larger picture.

This is a big part of the joy of being a BVSer – each volunteer fills a unique role, but together we form a group that is working to do good in the world. We each work in different towns, with different organizations, and on different tasks each day. But we create this larger BVS community that brings us together. It is comforting to know that I am a small part of something bigger. Brethren Volunteer Service has been around for quite some time, and each volunteer each year contributes to the larger BVS legacy.

The year and a half that I have spent serving with BVS has quickly become more than just a gap year. I have realized that even small moments, small tasks, and individual people can have a large impact on a volunteer organization and the world around us when we all work together to form a larger community of people.



Josiah Esch, Unit 339 – SnowCap Volunteer

I started my year of volunteering at SnowCap Community Services on September 22, 2025. Less than a week later, on September 27, the president announced plans to send the National Guard into Portland in order to “protect [federal immigration (ICE) facilities] in war ravaged Portland.” This brought heightened attention to the (very much not “war ravaged”) city and started a legal battle that has continued up to the writing of this piece. ICE’s presence in Oregon and the greater Portland area has also increased in the months since I arrived. A few days after the National Guard announcement, on October 1, the federal government shut down. This resulted in several consequences, including the expiration of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits on November 1, leaving millions across the country without reliable access to food. SnowCap, as a food and clothing pantry, serves hundreds of clients daily from all backgrounds, ethnicities, household sizes, and locations across Portland. Basically, within a month of my arrival, the organization found itself at the center of two of the biggest political stories in the country.

Awareness and discussion around these issues have been constant and unavoidable parts of my time at SnowCap. Most of SnowCap’s clients use SNAP regularly, and SnowCap saw record numbers of households and individuals served between October 22 and mid-November, when the state of Oregon announced that they would step in and partially fund SNAP for their constituents. The shutdown ended a few days later, but over those couple of weeks, SnowCap broke the record for ‘households served’ five times and consistently served over one thousand individuals daily, up hundreds from August.

We also regularly began to hear from clients who were scared to come in person to the pantry due to ICE’s increased presence in the community. As well as targeting local elementary schools, shopping centers, and government buildings, ICE has been intentionally targeting certain food pantries in Portland and detaining people who are waiting in line to feed their families. I personally hear updates and stories from community members who I talk to at the window that express general anxiety about ICE’s presence in the community and in particular about ICE’s alarming tactics and inordinate use of force. ICE’s vehicles have been spotted overnight in SnowCap’s parking lot, and just last week almost entered the property during service hours before being deterred by the incessant honking of a conscientious volunteer. I and most of my coworkers, while glad to have avoided a confrontation up to the time of this writing, do see such an event as inevitable. *(continued on page 2)*

Joanna Erbaugh – FaithX Participant

“A useful way to define love is sustained, compassionate attention.” – John Muir Laws

I went on two FaithX trips this summer: to South Bend, Indiana and to Little Rock, Arkansas. They were very different experiences. In South Bend, we stayed at the Prince of Peace Church of the Brethren at the corner of a busy intersection. In Little Rock, we stayed in a retreat house in the middle of some fields in the “outback” of Ferncliff Camp & Conference Center. In South Bend, we volunteered at organizations fighting food insecurity; in Little Rock, we assembled Church World Service kits and disassembled tree houses. But both experiences helped teach me to love the unloved things.

In South Bend, I saw how much food that is thrown away can still be eaten. Most food is good for weeks, months, or even years past its listed “expiration date.” Dented cans often contain perfectly good vegetables. And old, moldy bread can be given to farmers to feed livestock (pigs in particular). Many people see foods like these and decide they are useless, but working at a food bank taught me to pay attention. I now know to look for uses for food, even when it isn’t perfect.

“Both experiences helped teach me to love the unloved things.”

I participated in two different kinds of service in Little Rock. For part of the week, our group worked in Ferncliff’s Disaster Assistance Center (DAC). We assembled three different kinds of Church World Service Kits: clean-up buckets, period packs, and hygiene kits. In the DAC, I learned that menstrual products, which are included in period packs, are not distributed by the Red Cross or covered by government assistance programs. I found it so powerful that Church World Service works to bring attention and support to the often-ignored needs of nearly half the population.



I also worked outdoors at Little Rock, helping dismantle a structurally unsafe tree house, doing trail maintenance, and tending Ferncliff’s Farmstead. The Farmstead, complete with chickens, goats, sheep, donkeys, and raised garden beds, is truly dedicated to raising “children who love the unloved things.” Sowder’s poem was even posted on the fence surrounding the garden beds! The Farmstead’s purpose is to teach children where food comes from – it doesn’t come prepackaged from supermarkets, it comes from the ground and from living, breathing animals. I grew up with a backyard garden, so growing my own food wasn’t new to me. However, I hadn’t spent much time with farm animals. I now know that chickens like caramel corn!

My FaithX experiences at Ferncliff and South Bend were very different. Even so, both increased my awareness of not only the problems in our world but also the solutions. Learning to love the unloved things requires these kinds of opportunities for sustained, compassionate attention. From feeding chickens to sorting donated food, I felt blessed by the chance to create real change in the world.

Continued from page 1 - Josiah Esch

Despite all the above concerns, my time serving at SnowCap through BVS has been incredible and truly special. I have enjoyed exploring Portland on the weekends and have found my work in the food pantry to be exactly what I was hoping for this year. My job is taking the orders of clients at the front window, asking if they need pet food and toiletries, and making sure that we’re helping as much as we can before handing the order to the pantry. I love the varied days, and interacting directly with the clients helps me to see firsthand the difference being made.

SnowCap is a wonderful organization and every single staff member and volunteer I’ve met has been so totally and completely dedicated toward helping the community in whatever ways they can. Thanksgiving week also nearly broke records and while we were thankful the need wasn’t as great as earlier in the month, the holiday season is usually the busiest time of the year, and that was definitely evident in the days leading up to the holiday. It has been wonderful to see the community step up to meet the growing need. Donations to the pantry have increased almost as much as distribution has. People are giving more than ever and volunteering more than ever and reaching out to SnowCap to make sure that they’re donating exactly the things we’re looking for.

Though the world certainly seems chaotic currently, even these few months in Portland and at SnowCap have given me hope and shown me the sheer incredible number of people who are working toward making a more just world where everybody looks out for their community and everyone has enough.

“It has been wonderful to see the community step up to meet the growing need.”



FaithX Service Trips

Registration open January 14 to April 1, 2026.

Jr. & Sr. High (completed 6th grade – age 19)

June 9-14 University Park, MD
June 14-19 Winston-Salem, NC
June 21-26 Rodney, MI
July 5-10 Hershey, PA

Adult (ages 18+)

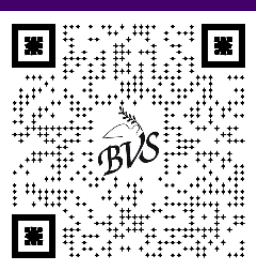
June 14-22 Northern Ireland

Older Adult (Ages 50+)

February 22-27 Gotha, FL

We Are Able

July 13-16 Sturgis, MI



INTERESTED IN:

Volunteering with BVS or FaithX,
Receiving monthly BVS updates,
Connecting with BVS alumni or supporters...

FIND LINKS TO ALL THESE AT:
<https://linktr.ee/brethrenvolunteerservice>



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