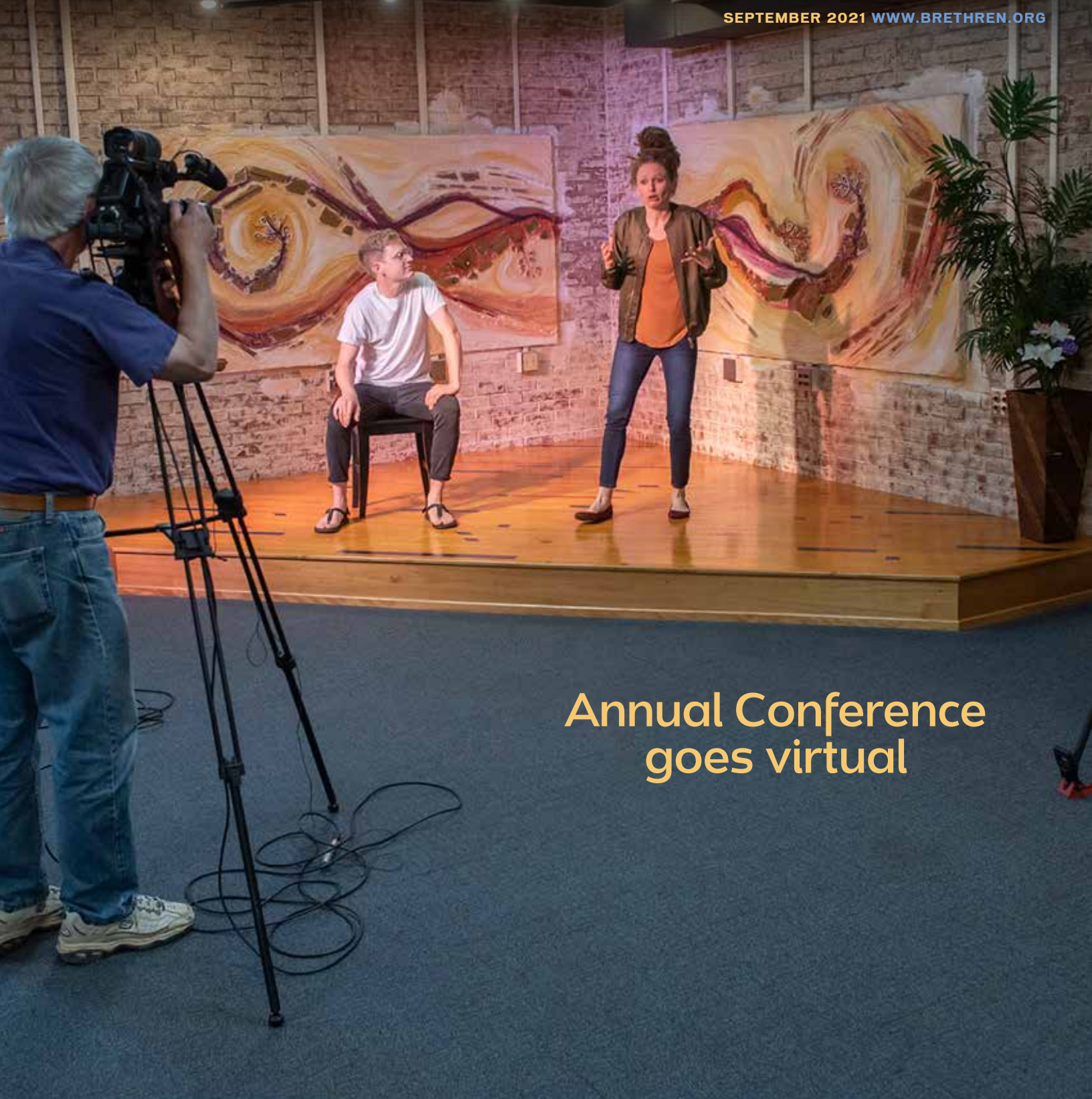


CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN MESSENGER

SEPTEMBER 2021 WWW.BRETHREN.ORG



Annual Conference
goes virtual



Annual Conference affirms compelling vision statement

by Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

The 2021 Annual Conference affirmed the following compelling vision statement for the Church of the Brethren:

“Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.”

The affirmation of this vision statement, which was the only substantive business item before the delegate body this year, ended a process of conversation and data gathering that involved some 3,000 church members in numerous gatherings and venues across the denomination over several years. Conversations about the compelling vision were held around the tables at previous Conferences and continued this year in small groups that met in virtual breakout rooms. Both delegates and nondele-

gates who registered for the full Conference were invited to participate.

The “tables” discussed and submitted responses to a number of questions posed by Rhonda Pittman Gingrich, co-chair of the Compelling Vision Team along with general secretary David Steele. Also on the team were Michaela Alphonse, Kevin Daggett, John Jantzi, Brian Messler, Colleen Michael, Alan Stuckey, Kay Weaver, former moderators Samuel Sarpiya and Donita Keister, 2021 moderator Paul Munday, and Conference director Chris Douglas.

A discernment process was used to affirm the vision statement. Delegates were offered the choice of four responses: first, “I feel inspired and wholeheartedly affirm the vision”; second, “I affirm the vision”; third, “I have reservations, but will set them aside and affirm the vision for the good of the body”; and fourth, “I cannot affirm the vision.”

Of the 519 registered delegates, 450 participated in making the decision. When results were tallied, the statement was affirmed with 82 percent of those participating choosing one of the

affirmative options.

Presiding at this year’s first-ever fully online Conference were moderator Paul Munday, assisted by moderator-elect David Sollenberger and secretary James Beckwith. The Conference officers also presided over the online meeting of the Standing Committee of district delegates June 27-30.

Standing Committee to continue conversation with On Earth Peace

Garnering the most discussion from the district delegates was a report from a team tasked with posing questions to On Earth Peace, in the most recent of many rounds of interaction over recent years. Standing Committee initiated this latest interaction some months ago, after On Earth Peace joined the Supportive Communities Network of the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests (BMC).

After receiving lengthy documents and a verbal report from the task team, Standing Committee voted to continue conversation with On Earth Peace. The task team emphasized the positive nature of the conversation, and On Earth Peace staff Matt Guynn also expressed the agency’s desire to continue the conversation.

The continuing conversation will be based on already agreed-upon dialogue questions and will take place at several meetings over the next year. The decision included encouragement for “a collaborative conversation with On Earth Peace that lays the foundation for increased understanding and future conversations regarding the relation-



Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

1994



1995



1996



ships between On Earth Peace and the larger denomination.” The task team will report back to Standing Committee next summer.

A separate vote allowed the same task team to continue, setting aside precedent that only current Standing Committee members serve on subcommittees. On the team are Donita Keister (chair), who was serving as immediate past moderator; Susan Chapman Starkey (secretary) from Virgina District; Bob Johansen from Northern Indiana District; Craig Stutzman from Mid-Atlantic District; and John Willoughby from Michigan District.

The conversation process so far has included correspondence and a face-to-face meeting on June 8 that brought together the task team with a delegation chosen by On Earth Peace: Gynn, board co-chairs Melisa Leiter-Grandison and Irvin Heishman, Carol Wise representing BMC, and Brian Flory representing the Supportive Communities Network. Christian Peacemaker Teams provided two people who served as facilitators and process observers.

Amendments to the “Appeal” section of the “Ethics in Ministry Relations” document of Annual Conference were recommended to Standing Committee by a subcommittee reviewing judicial roles and the appeals process. The amendments align the document with process changes made in 2019, provide more time to prepare for appeals, and encourage appeals not to be brought until all means of resolution or reconsideration by districts are exhausted. The amendments will be brought to Annual Conference for approval.

The subcommittee also proposed a new listening process, giving guidance and structure for accepting requests from those who want to speak with Standing Committee. The process

Elections and appointments

Two ballots were elected: the 2021 ballot and a 2020 ballot deferred from the Conference that was canceled because of the pandemic. Those elected from the 2020 ballot, except for the moderator-elect, serve a year less than the usual term. Also below are additional appointments. Two appointments to unexpired terms on the Mission and Ministry Board already are completed and are not included below.

Annual Conference moderator-elect: Tim McElwee of Wolcottville, Ind.

Church of the Brethren Leadership Team: Torin Eikler, Northern Indiana District executive

Program and Arrangements Committee: Nathan Hollenberg, Broadway, Va.; Beth Jarrett, Harrisonburg, Va.

Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee: Arthur Fourman, Dayton, Ohio; Gene Hagenberger, Mid-Atlantic District executive; Robert S. McMinn, Huntingdon, Pa.

Mission and Ministry Board: Lauren Seganos Cohen, San Gabriel, Calif., Area 5; Barbara Daté, Eugene, Ore., Area 5; John Michael Hoffman, McPherson, Kan., at-large; Josiah Ludwick, Harrisburg, Pa., Area 1; Kathy A. Mack, Rochester, Minn., Area 4; Meghan Horne Mauldin, Columbus, N.C., Area 3; Karen Shively Neff, Gotha, Fla., Area 3; Joanna Wave Willoughby, Wyoming, Mich., at-large; Rebecca Miller Zeek, Duncansville, Pa., Area 1


Brethren Benefit Trust: Sara Davis, La Cañada Flintridge, Calif.; Janis Fahs, North Manchester, Ind.; Donna March, Carpentersville, Ill.; Gerald (Jerry) Patterson, Fairfax, Va.; Wayne T. Scott, Harrisburg, Pa.; David L. Shissler, Hummelstown, Pa.; Kathryn Whitacre, McPherson, Kan.

Bethany Theological Seminary: Chris Bowman, Manassas, Va., representing clergy; Mark A. Clapper, Elizabethtown, Pa., at-large; Karen O. Crim, Dayton, Ohio, at-large; John Flora, Bridgewater, Va., at-large; Drew Hart, Harrisburg, Pa., representing laity; Jacki Hartley, Elgin, Ill., representing laity; Steve Longenecker, Harrisonburg, Va., representing the colleges; Richard Rose, Claremont, Calif., at-large

On Earth Peace: Rudy Amaya, Pasadena, Calif.; Ruth Aukerman, Union Bridge, Md.; Irvin R. Heishman, Tipp City, Ohio; Alyssa Parker, Harrisburg, Pa.

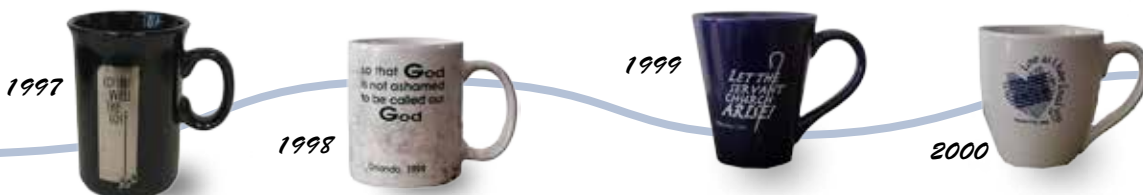
will be added to the *Standing Committee Manual*.

The Nominating Committee proposed options for procedural changes for nominations from the floor of Annual Conference.

Discussion touched on the lengthy and deliberative process to prepare a ballot and how nominations from the floor circumvent that process and cause confusion, while acknowledging that nominations from the floor have value when there are valid concerns about choices for leadership. Standing Committee decided to continue working on the concern next year. 



Incoming moderator Dave Sollenberger and moderator-elect Tim McElwee are consecrated during closing worship.





Journal notes from a virtual table

by Frances Townsend



Frances Townsend

Thursday, July 1

Sitting at my kitchen table with my laptop just isn't the same as being at a table in the Annual Conference business session. There is such richness to in-person connections. I look forward to being together, however.

When we introduce ourselves in my small group, one participant says, "Where we make connections is where we overcome our fears."

The compelling vision should create rich discussion tomorrow. Today the Compelling Vision Team is presenting a video describing the multi-year process. They break down several key parts of the statement, commenting on some of the most common areas of remark or concern.

One concern is that focus on the "neighborhood" will undermine world mission. We are reassured that Jesus did not define "neighbor" narrowly. This is not meant to take us away from more geographically distant mission.

A part of the statement that invites more thought: the encouragement to call and develop leaders, but also to call every person to a life of courageous, radical discipleship.

Friday, July 2

Today's table talk will take up two solid hours, with discussion of five questions posed by Compelling Vision Team co-chair Rhonda Pittman Gingrich.

One of the reasons table talk is being used is so that people can arrive at their own deeper understandings through the process. We know in an abstract sense that other people notice

different things in the vision statement because of their different life experiences. It is so powerful to have real-life examples of that as we share our perspectives, even if only in little boxes on a screen.

Gingrich begins by describing what can be called the "soul" of an institution and asks, "How does this compelling vision reflect the soul of the Church of the Brethren?" My group's discussion begins with an uncommon amount of silence for Brethren, but eventually we come up with answers.

One person allows that making disciples is a core value, but "innovative, adaptable, and fearless" has not traditionally characterized us. We name stories about early Brethren being much more fearless than the current generation.

We think about key words in the statement and how they match up with the Brethren soul. Words about relationship, the use of "together," make us think of the strong value Brethren place on the church as a family of faith.

The statement can be read that we are supposed to call innovative, adaptable, and fearless disciples even if we ourselves are not those things. That will require humility and willingness to trust in God to lead us all.

The second question, "What are the needs in your community that might be healed through radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ?" gives us less difficulty. All of us name big problems common to our communities including racism, poverty, addictions, mental illness, and the church's

unwillingness to openly discuss so many concerns including gender and sexuality. So often the church fails people by not owning problems as "ours" but pretending they are outside the church, so that those who are affected feel shame and stay quiet. It is not only the community outside the church that needs Jesus' radical transformation, but also the people inside the church. Humility comes into play.

The word "listen" is key—as in, take seriously the newest people in the church—in response to the third question, "How might we work at calling and equipping innovative, adaptable, and fearless disciples to live out the Jesus in the neighborhood vision?" New people are the most likely to bring in other people, partly because their biggest relational ties are outside the church.

One of our group has been with the church for about five years and is frustrated with how Brethren treat new people as visitors for too long. Another says her teenager is thinking of leaving the church because of "take it or leave it" speeches about what Brethren should believe. Disciples need guidance, but we are all disciples together. Again, humility.

The fourth question invites us to name roadblocks: "What are the chal-



2001



2002



2003



2004

lenges we might face as we live into the Jesus in the neighborhood vision in our various contexts and communities?" Our group bucks the usual Brethren trend; we tell stories of how our congregations overcame such challenges.

Finally, we are asked, "What new steps could your congregation take to more closely align your way of life with the 'Jesus in the neighborhood' vision?" We think of new programs a congregation could initiate and wonder what an already engaged congregation could possibly add. Then we realize that more is being asked. We begin to look at concepts like focus—how this vision asks congregations to shift focus from institutional maintenance and survival to the neighborhood and mission.

As we talk, one person in every group tries to capture our thoughts, type them into a computer, and send them to the committee. Each person can send in their own words, as well. Our most useful insights will find their way to more people.

Other groups are coming up with very different answers. This process

gives a way for every voice to be heard, and for us to influence one another's thinking. When we find a tool that allows more of us to be used by the Holy Spirit to build up the body, we are on the right path.

Saturday, July 3

As we gather around our virtual table this morning, we are presented with the question, "How might we be known—both as congregations and as a denomination—if we truly embrace and live out the vision of Jesus in the neighborhood?"

After a long silence, conversation begins around how churches are less noticed, let alone known, than we think. How would living out this vision turn that sad truth around? One person uses the biblical image of the light on the hill, a place people turn to when help is needed. Another challenges us to consider what unique gifts the Brethren bring, naming a deep understanding of peace as one. Someone says, "If you don't do something important, you're just another building."

More than one person admits their

By the numbers

Registration:

1,224 including **519** delegates and **705** nondelegates

New fellowships and church projects:

1 fellowship: Centro Ágape en Acción (Los Banos) in Pacific Southwest District
3 projects: Nueva Visión la Hermosa Iglesia de Los Hermanos, Pacific Southwest District; Conexión Pasadena, Pacific Southwest District; Light of the Gospel Fellowship, Atlantic Northeast District

Offerings received:

(as of the end of July, totals still to be finalized)

\$9,624 for the denomination's Core Ministries

\$10,309 for church rebuilding in Nigeria

\$12,556 for the Conference budget

\$4,889 for Conference translation services

\$8,423 for Conference children's activities

\$250 for the Ministers' Assistance Fund

\$250 for Intercultural Ministries

\$200 for Global Mission

\$150 for Discipleship Ministries

\$100 for the Global Food Initiative

\$55 for the Haiti Medical Project

\$200 to be divided among offerings

Virtual blood drive:

77 units of blood, including **6** "double reds" and **14** donations of platelets

Minimum Cash Salary Table

for pastors:

2 percent cost-of-living increase for 2022



2006



2007



2008




congregation may have difficulty coming up with a unified vision to pursue.

Time runs out and we are called back to the business session, where various table responses are read. Some are inspiring—that we may be known by our love, our compassion, our welcoming, as healers. Others are challenging—that we may be known as risk takers, peculiar people who actually live out our faith. One is sobering—by living

out the vision, we may be known but not popular. Jesus told his disciples much the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount.

Moderator Paul Munday leads the delegates through the process of adopting the vision. Prayer and hymn singing fill the time while delegates make their decisions in an online vote. When results are tallied, the statement is adopted.

Tables are convened one more time: “As you consider your gifts and passions, what is one thing you personally can do to better align your way of life with the Jesus in the neighborhood vision?”

It is a question that cannot be answered so quickly. 

Frances Townsend is a pastor in Michigan serving the Onekama and Marilla congregations.



Annual Conference on one screen: What's so difficult about that?

by Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

You can't put the genie back in the bottle,” said David Sollenberger, pausing for an interview during the first-ever fully online Annual Conference. He was moderator-elect this year, while keeping an eye on the videotaping that was live-streamed from the General Offices—a task that ordinarily would have taken up all of his time but this year was carried by his crew of Larry

Glick, Chris Brown, and Adin Repogle.

For many years now, the Conference business and worship have been livestreamed, but people could not be delegates or attend insight sessions and other Conference events without being onsite. The “genie” is the expectation that, after a successful fully online Conference, we will do it again.

Accomplishing a fully online Conference is easier said than done,

however, according to those who put together this year's event.

What's so difficult?

Christian Saucedo is one of three partners at Covision, the company that provided the online platform for the Conference. He and other Covision staff worked closely with the Program and Arrangements Committee and Conference staff, holding weekly meetings starting in January.

Those meetings were indispensable, according to Conference director Chris Douglas. Without help from people like Saucedo and Enten Eller, who regularly livestreams worship and business, “I didn't know enough to know what questions to ask,” she said.

Prior to the pandemic, Douglas would never have imagined putting together an online Conference. She wondered, “Could we really do it? It felt like driving down the interstate blindfolded at 60 miles per hour.”

Here are some of the difficulties:

1. Pick an online platform. There are many platforms and program options, with differing bells and



Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

2009



2010



2011



2012





Glenn Resigel

Left: Dave Sollenberger videotapes musicians at Elizabethtown (Pa.) Church of the Brethren. Below: Susan Starkey holds up cue cards for her children, who were videotaped at Camp Bethel in Virginia.

whistles, wide variations in cost, and a range of skills required of presenters and attendees. For example, many platforms could provide a virtual exhibit hall, but it would have been complicated to set up. Instead, groups that usually have booths, exhibits, or meal events were offered online networking sessions.

The Covision platform created the different views that participants had and provided for “table groups” to meet for discussion and to submit responses. This conference did not differ technically from Covision’s usual corporate clients, Saucedo said. What did differ was how Annual Conference works at building relationships and church community. Making a fully online event meet that goal “was a real challenge,” he said. “The sense of community that you guys are building is not what a lot of events are doing.”

2. Connect people virtually.

Meeting virtually allows no in-person contact, no hallway conversations, no hugs for old friends or handshakes for new acquaintances, and no option to go to the microphone on the business floor. So additional networking sessions were offered as Q&A opportunities to interact with groups that reported to the delegate body.

3. Help Brethren who are unfamiliar with digital technology. Staff and committee members spent a lot of



Glenn Resigel

time helping attendees participate in an online event. The volume of phone calls before and during the Conference made apparent “real differences in our constituency,” Douglas said. “Some people were stretched really hard.” This shows “a new divide in the church: those comfortable with digital technology and those for whom it is not familiar and is overwhelming”

In addition to those who did not have cameras and microphones on their computers, said Eller, some congregations are in “internet-underserved areas.” He regretted that some were not able to participate as much as others, but felt the staff and committee “worked hard at making it accessible to everyone, even if they

didn’t have the latest tech.”

4. Make a virtual Conference feel familiar.

The organizers wanted the event to feel familiar to those who have been to Annual Conference in person. This was especially difficult for the insight sessions, in part because Douglas and the committee did not know what the end product would be when they started working on it.

The effort also was hampered by having to “limit everything to the one screen that online participants saw,” Eller explained. In the business hall, for example, people see many things at once—the head table, large screens on each side, subtitles for the hearing impaired, information provided on



paper. But online “the window to your world is one screen.”

Sollenberger, who with his team pre-recorded much of the worship, said he tried to simulate the in-person experience. He wanted the same level of visual quality that Conferencegoers would see if they were sitting in the audience.

Videotaping worship required lots of travel and time spent in editing “so the visual would be pleasing and not like a Zoom call,” Sollenberger said. Starting in April, he and his crew taped in a dozen places, and additional footage came from various other people. Sollenberger praised music coordinator Josh Tindall and all of the musicians, who were “an incredible addition,” and Nohemi Flores, who coordinated Spanish translation for worship.

5. Keep tabs on the cost. “Brethren have no idea of the cost involved in

doing online conferencing,” Douglas said. “In our culture people still expect online to be free.” Digital technology is expensive but “invisible and in the background.” While Covision is one of the least expensive companies offering online conferencing, the costs for audiovisual and streaming services were as much as they would be for an in-person Conference.


Eller saw this Conference as shifting resources toward digital technology and away from hotels and travel. It is “a lot cheaper when you think about all the participants in the event, not just leadership,” he said. “So many people have difficulty getting to Annual Conference. We don’t realize how exclusive it has become.”

So what’s next?

Douglas was heartened by the numbers of table groups that want to keep in

touch. By the end of the event, at least 20 groups had asked for email addresses. This “shows that, for some, the online format really worked.”

Eller was pleased with reaching “people who have never even tried to do this kind of thing before.” There are blessings of technology that the church could choose to embrace, he noted. We have been uprooted by the pandemic, and now must ask, “What are we going to do differently? Or even better?”

Sollenberger, who will be moderator next year, hopes for a repeat of some of the online components, in combination with an in-person event. He has new ideas about how to use video and multimedia technology creatively to “illuminate” the event. “It’s going to be an entertaining as well as inspirational Conference. There will be an entertainment value next year, I promise!” 



Cheryl Burnham/Highway Church

‘And now, it’s time to go home!’

Chris Douglas’ 35-year career in church leadership started with a pastorate at Northview Church of the Brethren in Indianapolis and ends with her retirement this fall as Conference director.

In between, she joined the denominational staff in the 1980s to take on two half-time positions—in urban ministry and youth and young adult ministry—and then shifted to fulltime youth and young adult ministry for some 20 years. She became Conference director in 2009.

For a few years, she has been asking herself, “Is this the right time to leave? It became real clear this winter that it is time—a *kairos* time,” she said. “The church is wanting to do something new.”

Douglas is pleased to pass the baton to someone younger. She and Rhonda Pittman Gingrich have worked together off and on for 32 years, ever since she interviewed Gingrich for the job of 1990 National Youth Conference coordinator.

“I feel the highest level of confidence in her being the next director,” Douglas said. “This is in great hands. You go, Rhonda!”



2017

2018



2019





Recapture your church's DNA

by Frank Ramirez

Toward the end of his presentation on “Doing Church in Uncharted Territory,” Tod

Bolsinger challenged Conferencegoers to think of a story from their congregation's history. It could be about a hero, or perhaps “a cherished moment that is retold over and over again. One that says, “This is what we are really all about.”

He called that type of story a “charism,” a Catholic term he defined as the grace-filled characteristic that serves the pain and needs of the community each church inhabits. That's where a church should pour its energy, and that provides the framework for what it means to “do church.”

The pandemic is allowing congregations to transform themselves to serve a changed world, but churches must determine who they really are. “For change to last it must be a healthy adaptation of the DNA of the group, our core values.”

“Adaptation is everything. What are we going to carry with us and what are we going to leave behind?” Bolsinger asked. “When we offer ourselves not as colonizers or people of great power or

imposing our will on others around us, by acts of generosity and love we come to an understanding of how our congregation can make an impact on our world for good.”

Adventure or die

Bolsinger, vice president and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, also presented at a forum sponsored by moderator Paul Munday. There he bolstered many of the ideas he presented to the Conference plenary.

The choice in the current climate is stark, he said: change the way we do church, or die. Most church leaders have been trained to work in the Christendom of a half-century ago when Christianity was the default setting. Today we are in a post-Christendom world and a different sort of leadership is necessary.

Many church leaders “go into deep denial,” Bolsinger said, or they seek out popular techniques to change—fear, facts, and force. These actually don't work. Bolsinger cited studies by Alan Deutschman, author of *Change or Die*, and others: “Fear will make people



change temporarily. Fear doesn't produce lasting change. Facts don't produce change. We can find ways to argue around facts.” And as for force, “You can't make people change.”

What does work? Bolsinger said churches need to “relate, repeat, and re-frame”: relate to new communities, recognizing that immigrant communities are vital and alive; repeat new practices, growing with each other and supporting each other; and re-frame the way we see the world, adopting new ways of thinking.

And lean into the discernment of the Holy Spirit, he advised. This requires “a kind of humility and openness. . . . In your heart, deeply believe God's Spirit has been at work.”

Frank Ramirez pastors Union Center Church of the Brethren in Nappanee, Ind.



More than a mug

by Traci Rabenstein

My collection of Annual Conference mugs represents 25 years of conferences. Here they are, with five photos filled in by Brethren Press.

I recently acquired this set from my grandmother, Ruth Covert (lovingly known as Meem). This collection exists because she attended many Annual Conferences as a delegate for Rockhill Church of the Brethren in Middle Pennsylvania District.

The mug most special to me is from Peoria, the first Conference I ever attended and one of the last that she was able to attend. She and I drove there together. After she became unable to travel, people from her congregation, district office, and family picked up mugs for her.

For me, these are more than mugs. This collection is a legacy of servant leadership by someone who understands the importance of staying connected and informed, and encourages others to do the same.

When I look at an Annual Conference mug, I think about how God calls me to use my gifts to serve in leadership within my congregation, my district, and the denomination. I think about being part of the body of Christ.

Traci Rabenstein is director of mission advancement for the Church of the Brethren.

Collectors: Brethren Press has a few mugs from 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021. Visit www.brethrenpress.com.