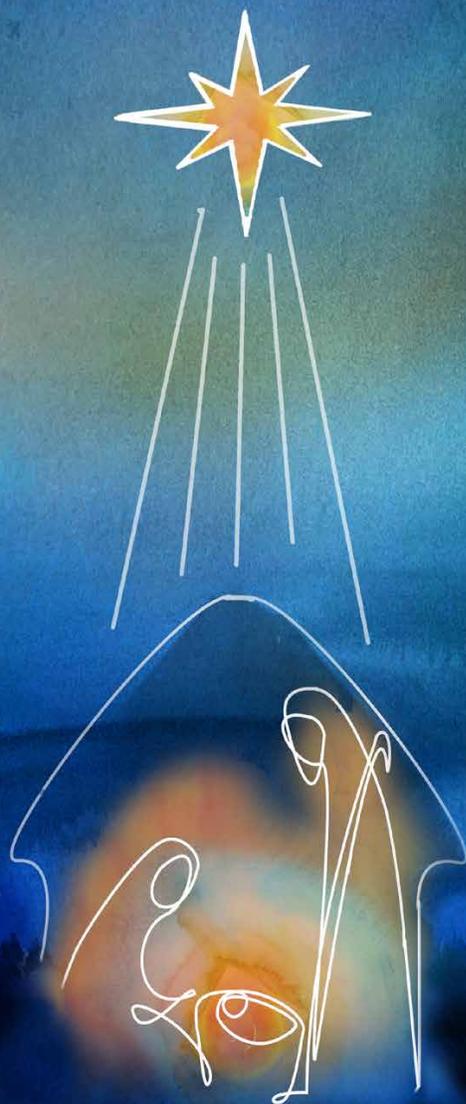


CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

MESSENGER

DECEMBER 2022 WWW.BRETHREN.ORG



Glory to God



Advent
Offering

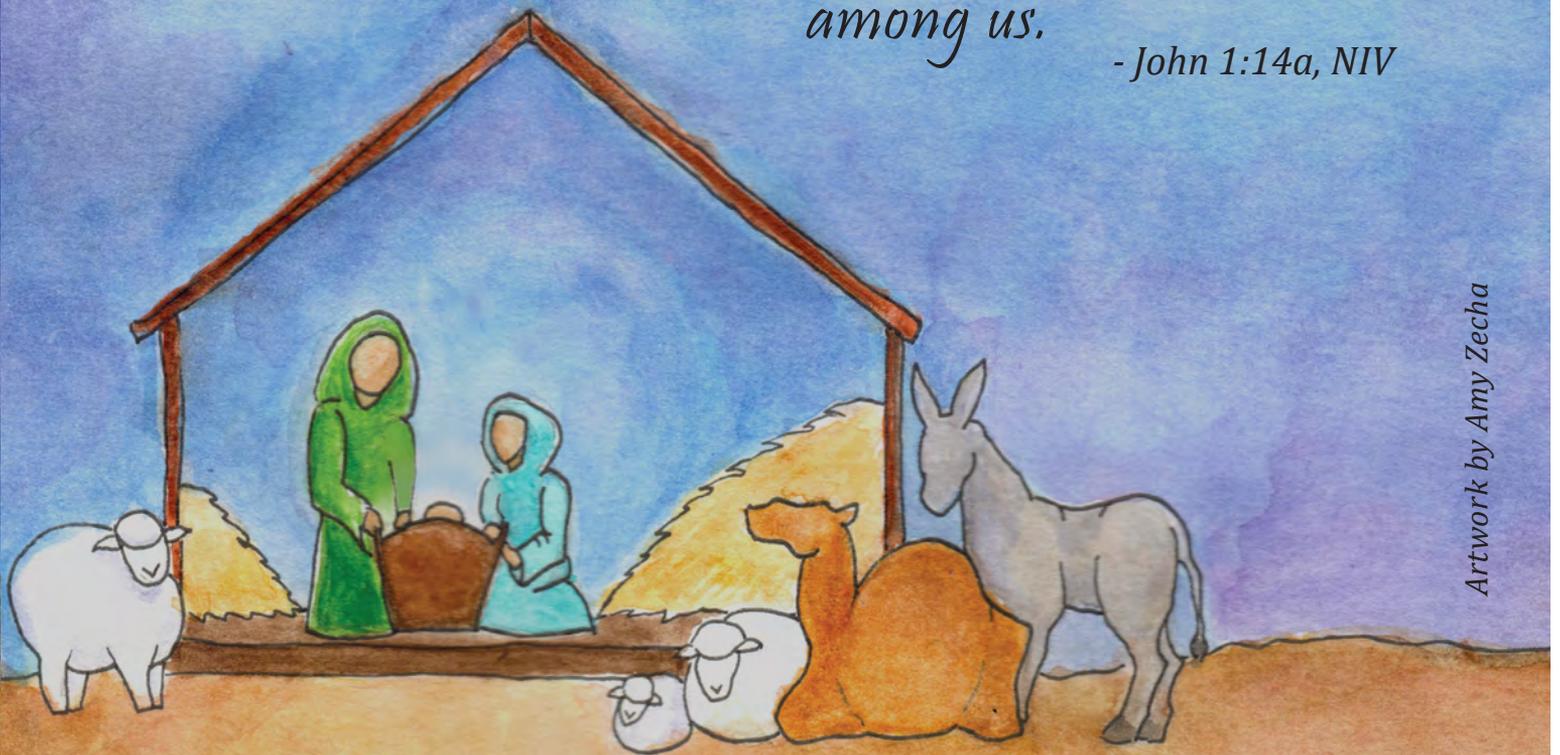
Go and tell what you hear and see
~ Matthew 11:4

Suggested date: December 11

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*The Word became flesh
and made his dwelling
among us.*

- John 1:14a, NIV



Artwork by Amy Zecha

May you be blessed with hope and joy as we experience Jesus dwelling among us.
May you be filled with peace and love as we celebrate the birth of Christ.

Merry Christmas from the Staff and Volunteers of the Church of the Brethren



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CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN MESSENGER

December 2022 Vol.171 No. 10 www.brethren.org/messenger



Publisher: Wendy McFadden Associate editor: Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford
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on the cover

Illustration by Paul Stocksdale

Star light

To watch a lunar eclipse, you have to be in the right place with a sky that's clear, and it helps if you're far away from the light pollution of city life. I was fortunate, then, to have all the right conditions early the morning of Nov. 8.

On vacation in a rented house, I wasn't at all sure which direction the moon was. But then I found it—a bright circle of light visible through the front window. From a news story earlier in the day, I knew what was going to happen minute by minute.



WENDY MCFADDEN
PUBLISHER

Celestial phenomena must have seemed mysterious when there was no NASA to tell you these things. Long ago, the movement of the moon and the sun and the stars seemed mostly predictable, but then sometimes not. Unusual activity in the sky sometimes evoked fear.

But fear was not the response of the magi when they saw a dramatic star in the east. Brazilian poet and theologian Rubem Alves imagines what they felt and what compelled them to travel so far.

In his story, found in *Transparencies of Eternity*, these magi are kings who rule with kindness and wisdom, with their lands and people prospering. All was well, so they should have been content. But each was filled with a desperate sadness, longing for something more.

Then one by one, recounts Alves, each from his own land saw a magnificent star in the sky. As each king gazed in wonder, he heard beautiful music and was filled with happiness. But the royal advisors could not see the star nor hear the music. In these three kingdoms, the ruler was thought to be senile and nearing death.

Undeterred, each of the kings set out from north, west, and south to follow the star in the east. After many days, they happened to encounter one another at the crossroads where the four directions of the world meet, and there they learned that these other travelers were also seeking the star. Said Alves: "They all came from the same nostalgia, and they all came in search of the same joy."

Finally, the magi arrived at the stable in Bethlehem. There they discovered that it was not the star that was giving light. Rather, it was the baby who gave light to the star.

Overwhelmed with joy and laughter, the kings placed their robes and riches on the ground. "Those things were too heavy," said Alves.

And then, when the kings went on their way, "they departed light."

Wendy McFadden

HOW TO REACH US

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Subscription rates:

\$17.50 individual rate
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\$14.50 gift rate
\$14.50 church club rate
- \$27 for 2 years
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MESSENGER (ISSN 0026-0355) is published 10 times a year by Brethren Press, Church of the Brethren. Periodicals postage paid at Elgin, Ill., and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MESSENGER, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120-1694.

 Printed on recycled paper (20% post consumer)



Angel by Wassily Kandinsky, 1911

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.’” — Luke 1:30

“All God’s angels come to us disguised.” —poet James Russell Lowell

“According to the Talmud, every blade of grass has its own angel bending over it, whispering, ‘Grow, grow.’” —author Barbara Brown Taylor

“While we are sleeping, angels have conversations with our souls.” —anonymous

“Every visible thing in this world is put in the charge of an Angel.” —St. Augustine

“Music is well said to be the speech of angels.” —essayist Thomas Carlyle

“For truly we are all angels temporarily hiding as humans.” —psychiatrist Brian Weiss



ANGELS EVERYWHERE

One of the best-known secular songs about angels is “Angels Among Us,” written by Don Goodman and Becky Hobbs and made famous by the country band Alabama in 1993.

In a 2021 article in *Wide Open Country*, reporter Courtney Fox noted that Hobbs was inspired to write the song after surviving a car accident in 1986. After working on it for a few years, she finished the lyrics with Goodman. Alabama lead singer Randy Owen said the band received “letters of gratitude from all over the world” for the song.

Reflecting on the song, which is often played at the Christmas season, Owen told *al.com*: “You can do some really magical things with music.”

The chorus says, in part, “They come to you and me in our darkest hours ... to guide us with the light of love.”

Other country musicians have also covered the song, Fox wrote, and in 2012, following the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting, singer Demi Lovato released a cover to support the families affected.

WINGS AS WE SING

Quite a few Christmas hymns and songs include angels in their lyrics. Can you arrange the ones here chronologically, from the earliest one published/released to the most recent? Answers are below.

Angels from the Realms of Glory
Angels We Have Heard on High
Mary, Did You Know?
It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Joseph’s Song
Go, Tell It on the Mountain
The First Noel
O Holy Night
O Come, All Ye Faithful

ANSWERS: The First Noel (est. 13th to 17th century, exact date uncertain); Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (1739); O Come, All Ye Faithful (1751); In Latin; Mary, Did You Know? (1991); Holy Night (1847); It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (1849); Angels We Have Heard on High (1855, in French); Go, Tell It on the Mountain (1909); Joseph’s Song (1987); Mary, Did You Know? (1991).

ON THE DIAMOND AND THE SCREEN

The Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, which began play in 1961, took their name from their original home city, Los Angeles, nicknamed “The City of Angels.” The name had been used by other baseball teams in the city dating back to the late 19th century. The team (then called the California Angels) was featured in the 1994 Disney movie “Angels in the Outfield,” a remake of a 1951 film by the same name.

DID YOU KNOW?

In a 2017 Pew Research Center report, about 90 percent of Americans said they celebrate Christmas. But only 46 percent said they celebrate it as “a primarily religious holiday.”



Heifer-themed quilt finds way back to a place with deep roots

In July 1945, a load of heifers was brought to the Roger and Olive Roop farm in Carroll County, Md., beginning a three-year journey to collect and care for animals destined for families in war-torn Europe through Church of the Brethren Heifers for Relief, which later became the Heifer Project and is now Heifer International. During that time about 3,600 head of cattle were processed on the farm before being trucked to the port of Baltimore and then shipped to Germany and Poland.

The Roop's daughter Patricia (Roop Hollinger), who was eight when the animals first arrived on the family's farm, has many memories of that exciting time and the people who passed through, many of whom stayed on to help. Pat and her sister Shirley helped their mother feed them all.

When Pat heard that a beautiful quilt

honoring the connection between Carroll County, the Church of the Brethren, and Heifer International was being auctioned at the Mid-Atlantic District Disaster Response Auction this past May, she knew she had to bid on it. The stunning quilt was designed, sewn, and appliqued by Jo Ann Landon, a member of Westminster (Md.) Church of the Brethren and the district's administrative assistant. It was hand-quilted and bound by the Nimble Thimble group of Union Bridge Church of the Brethren.

After some vigorous back-and-forth bidding, Pat bought the quilt for \$6,400. When asked what she would do with it, she said with great emotion that it

would be passed down for generations to come, along with the stories that celebrated what their family had done and the role they had played at the birth of Heifer International. Landon was delighted and said she feels "as if the quilt is home where it should be." The story of those first heifers had come full circle.—Sharon Franzén



Jo Ann Landon

Michaela Alphonse



Michaela Alphonse



Michaela Alphonse



Empowering young women

Miami Haitian Church of the Brethren held its "first annual" Young Women's Conference Sept. 23-25, using the theme "Truth and Freedom" drawn from John 8. Organized by young adults in the congregation, the event featured speakers WeClaige "GiGi" Moise and Miami First Church of the Brethren pastor Michaela Alphonse along with prayer, worship, and a formal brunch.

Do you have district or congregational stories that might be of interest to MESSENGER? Short items with a photo are best. Send them to MESSENGER, c/o In Touch, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120 or messenger@brethren.org.

Lititz gives a home to a school in need

Community hospitality is a key part of Lititz (Pa.) Church of the Brethren's identity. It has a large, accessible playground next door, hosts Meals on Wheels and various community events, and works with refugee resettlement. So when a local Christian school found itself without a home, the church opened its doors—and much of its building—to give it one.

Lititz Christian School learned in spring 2021 that it would lose its lease after the following school year, sending it scurrying to find a new space. An extensive search turned up nothing that fit its space and financial parameters, however. A member at Lititz Church of the Brethren is a middle school English teacher at the school and raised the need.

"She said, 'This seems like a really crazy idea, but would the church consider ...,'" Lititz pastor Jim Grossnickle-Batterton said. "We have a lot of space that goes unused six days a week, and we decided to see if it might be a temporary fix."

The school had to reduce some of its programs to fit in the church's space, but it signed a three-year lease, and the

REMEMBERED

Paul W. Hoffman, president of McPherson (Kan.) College from 1976 to 1996 and moderator of the 1983 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, died on Sept. 30 in McPherson. Hoffman was a pastor in the denomination and dean of students at Manchester College in Indiana before moving to McPherson, where he was the longest-tenured sitting college or university president in the state at the time of his retirement. "His 20-year career at McPherson College was filled with many accomplishments, and his service to the college and the Church of the Brethren is unprecedented," current McPherson president Michael Schneider said.



building's rooms and halls are now filled with hundreds of students each week.

"They've basically taken over every square inch we would allow them," Grossnickle-Batterton said. "Any hour of the day, I can step outside my office now, and there are people buzzing around, lots of kids. It's a part of our broader vision of trying to make room for the community here in our church."

Pennsylvania auction benefits Ukraine crisis

An online art auction to support the Ukrainian crisis response took place in October with 181 donated art items from 60 donors up for bid. The ecumenical fundraising event was the vision of Lucretia Crum, a member of the Lutheran church. She and three friends—Margie Fultz of Mechanicsburg (Pa.) Church of the Brethren, Mitzi Jones of the Lutheran church, and Marilyn Zywiec of the United Methodist Church—came together to answer the question "What can we do?" about the horrific events playing out as Russia invaded

Ukraine. With 334 bids from 48 bidders, the auction's closing event, held at the Mechanicsburg church, raised nearly \$6,000 for Brethren Disaster Ministries.

Western Plains launches new 'sweet' fundraiser

At this year's Western Plains District Conference, held July 29-31 in McPherson, Kan., the district congregational resourcing team introduced a new fundraising effort called "Sweet Support."

Nine cakes were baked by various bakers from the district, representing each of the nine entities that the district supports. Conference attendees could then place silent bids on each of the beautiful cakes, as well as putting smaller donations into a cash jar.

The project raised nearly \$1,500, with funds going to Haiti Water Project (\$122); Camp Colorado (\$252); Ukraine ministries (\$171); Heifer International (\$122); Camp Mount Hermon (\$192); Western Plains District (\$151); Church of the Brethren Mission and Ministry Board (\$77); Haiti Medical Project (\$271); and South Sudan ministries (\$123).

Straw poll: *Onkama (Mich.) Church of the Brethren created an entry for the scarecrow contest at the town's annual fall festival in October. "Marilyn Acker, who is the daughter of the first woman in Michigan to be licensed to the ministry in the Church of the Brethren, is the person who has made this event happen for years," said pastor Frances Townsend, who helped decorate the scarecrow along with Alice Ross. The festival also includes hayrides, pumpkin decorating, a fun run, and other events.*



Frances Townsend

A broader vision

Two Western Plains congregations are among those living out 'Jesus in the Neighborhood'

Putting community at the center

by Mary Ann Saffer

The eastern plains of Colorado are a wide, windswept expanse with few people and fewer churches. As the nation expanded westward in the early 20th century, a number of new church plants were undertaken. Bethel Church of the Brethren, nine miles north of Arriba, Colo., is one of those still in existence.

Arriba is an underserved community that has been significantly affected by demographic changes. Family mobility results in fewer children and families, which leads to small-town schools consolidating, and many businesses closing. Consolidating schools result in broadening the community to a much larger geographic area. New people are moving to this rural area to escape the cities. People used to “know” each other, but today, due to busy lives and a lack of a place to gather, many people do not know their neighbors or their local churches.

When Elvin Frantz, an energetic pastor, came to this area back in early 1949, he saw a need and began talking about building a recreation center next to the church. The idea caught fire, and soon the community was just as involved as the church members. The building, built with donations and volunteer labor, was completed in November 1949 at a cost of about \$6,000 and named the Bethel Community Center (BCC).

It had the reputation for being available to community groups and individuals for a multitude of activities. Over the years, though, the building deteriorated, making it undesirable for community use. There were no bathrooms. It had a leaking roof and a mouse-infested kitchen.

The church discussed whether to restore the building or to tear it down. After surveying the community and finding 81 percent of residents interested in using a renovated facility, it was decided that since community had invested so much in the building, it should be restored and offered back for community use. The congregation and community worked side by side for 10 years to renovate the community center, with both donating money and services.

Multiple foundations provided additional financial support, and 2,082 volunteer hours were donated.



Mary Ann Saffer

Mary Ann Saffer

Renovations included bracing up the sagging roof, adding new roofing, insulation, drywall, and refinishing the water-damaged gym floor. An addition was built on to each end of the gym. Other enhancements included a modernized kitchen, bathrooms, meeting room, shower, and an ADA-accessible entrance, plus storage rooms for athletic equipment, tables, and chairs.

Today, the BCC is again used by the community. Activities include church-sponsored and other events such as roller-skating, parties, family gatherings, funerals, meetings, vacation Bible school, “Get to Know Your Neighbor” activities, social events, concerts, movies, and recreation, serving a wide range of people from parts of three counties—from children and youth to Girl Scouts and 4-H clubs to seniors and the disabled. It also provides a shelter the community may use during catastrophic events.

An active BCC board of directors, made up of church and community members, works closely with the Bethel church board. The BCC’s mission is to be “A Gathering Place Where Friends Become Family.” This project can be seen, in one sense, as an innovative way for one rural congregation to address today’s needs in its local community. In another sense, it stands as a tribute to the foresight of one energetic and charismatic young minister, who in 1949 began talking to the community about building a “recreation building.” 

Mary Ann Saffer is a Bethel Church of the Brethren member and chair of the Bethel Community Center board.



courtesy of McPherson Church of the Brethren

With one voice

by Anne Kirchner

“With one voice we’ll pass the Word along. With one voice, bring justice to the world. And with all the angels, we’ll spread the goodness of God.” —from “One Voice,” by Ricky Manalo

When the Church of the Brethren introduced the concept of “Jesus in the Neighborhood” as part of the denomination’s compelling vision statement, McPherson (Kan.) Church of the Brethren was quick to respond. A strategic planning team coordinated meetings and surveys to stimulate congregational conversation and vision. Church members collectively identified four actions to support the community: care for creation; engage in service and peacemaking; support youth, families, and young adults; and partner for racial justice.

“The congregation adopted a long-range plan known as ‘Jesus in the Neighborhood,’ which is referenced constantly in worship services, planning sessions, and conversation among church members,” said Marty Ward, chair of the strategic planning team. “The plan is serving to guide thought and action in important, focused ways.”

Projects are created based on individual interests and, upon church leadership approval, assigned to an established ministry team to ensure accountability and ongoing support. During 2022, McPherson has developed or enhanced more than 10 community outreach programs related to the four action areas. Here are some examples:

Care for creation

As part of the Central Kansas Conservancy’s “Adopt a Trail” volunteer program, church members adopted a mile of the Meadowlark Trail. This 20-mile “rails to trails” pedestrian and bike path runs between the cities of McPherson and Lindsborg. Volunteers keep the mile free of litter and excessive weeds and report needs for repair and maintenance.

“This project provides congregation members an opportunity to be stewards of the path and the plant life on either side it,” said participant Janelle Flory Schrock. “Additionally, a member of the congregation lives near the trail and has committed to hosting post-work party bonfires, so the project provides an opportunity to gather socially as well.”

Engage in service and peacemaking

Oak Harbor Cottages is a community neighborhood sponsored by the McPherson Housing Coalition (MHC). Ten tiny homes offer emergency shelter for families experiencing homelessness. The McPherson church committed to building one tiny home. The congregation raised \$50,000, assisted with home construction, donated home furnishings, and named the home “Peaceful Oak.”

“Watching the church body come together has been an incredible experience for the community, the organization, and the families in the cottage,” said MHC executive director Chris Goodson. “A pastor once said that people are watching to see how Christians act when no one is watching. This project has allowed the community to know the heart and faith of the Christian community in our town.”

Support youth, families, and young adults

Established in 1982 by the late Barbara Flory, the congregation’s Good Beginnings Preschool serves as a reminder that early childhood education is an invaluable community tool. Teachers focus on social and emotional development, kindergarten readiness, and motor skills.

“Barbara’s vision was that each child would be affirmed and loved as a child of God and nurtured in learning, growth, and development by caring Christian teachers,” said preschool director Carol Temple. “The preschool was and continues to be available to children from the church, from McPherson, and from surrounding communities.”

Partner for racial justice

Striving to understand ongoing racial differences, a book study convened using Jemar Tisby’s book *How to Fight Racism*. Group members were intentionally invited to assemble a diverse group expanding beyond church membership. Members included a leader from a nearby predominantly Black church, a student leader from McPherson College, and residents at The Cedars retirement village.

“The connection with the neighborhood church continues to grow,” Marty Ward noted. “Future participation with McPherson College students in efforts to improve race relations has also been elevated among our congregation.”



To emphasize this initiative, the McPherson church this year adopted “One Voice” by Ricky Manalo as a signature song. It suggests taking the Word everywhere, including to our neighborhoods. Now “One Voice” is sung regularly during worship services, reminding congregation members about their commitment. And with one voice, they will spread the goodness of God. 

Anne Kirchner is a member of McPherson Church of the Brethren. To learn more about the McPherson “Jesus in the Neighborhood” strategic plan, visit <https://macbrethren.org>.

A zeal for mission

by Jeanine Wine

In 1916, most members of the Church of the Brethren considered missions to be the “great first-work” of the church. Although for years handkerchiefs had waved Brethren missionaries to India (1894) and China (1908), work in Africa remained unexplored.

That changed in October 1916 when Manchester College president Otho Winger welcomed Dr. Karl Kumm of the Sudan United Mission to the Indiana campus to speak about his work as a missionary explorer. Galvanized by Kumm’s passionate plea for help in the Western Sudan, seven students formed an Africa Prayer Band, committing themselves to service in the African field. Their zeal spread to Juniata College (Huntingdon, Pa.) through the United

Student Volunteers—affiliated clubs on Brethren campuses focusing on mission study and evangelism.

At the 1918 Annual Conference, college students from Manchester, Juniata, and Mount Morris (Ill.) formed the “Africa Volunteers of the Brotherhood” and compelled the General Mission Board to take action. In 1921, an investigative delegation was sent to Africa as an extension of a world mission tour. It included board secretary Elder J.H.B. Williams, who came down with typhoid while on the Indian Ocean en route to Kenya. He was able to reach solid ground before dying in Mombasa.

Williams’ death and burial in Africa served to stimulate interest in the continent, and the Mission Board decided to begin work the following year. Several locations were

considered, but Kumm’s description of a remote area in northeastern Nigeria that contained some half-million souls not yet converted to Islam sounded promising. Emissaries would need to scout this vast territory to find an appropriate site to establish a mission. But who could be asked to go?

Two recently married couples, Albert and Lola (Bechtel) Helser and Stover and Ruth (Royer) Kulp, graduates of Manchester and Juniata, respectively, accepted the call. After much soul-searching, it was determined the husbands would forge ahead and that the wives would travel later. Already a nurse, Lola Helser would use the interlude to develop skills in Christian education at Bethany Bible School, and Ruth Kulp would study tropical medicine at Livingstone College in London.

“ The missionaries, somewhat excited by the prospect of trekking, mounted steeds and rode into the sand-filled winds of the seasonal harmattan blowing from the Sahara. ”



Early Brethren mission workers Albert Helser and Stover Kulp ride through Nigeria on horseback.

230 miles east of Jos. They were hoping to cover the distance by truck, but the many supplies obtained would need to be conveyed by carriers: men who could balance 60- to 75-pound loads on their heads and walk 15 to 20 miles a day!

Kulp and Helser employed three Nigerians: Sheihu, to hire and supervise 30 carriers, and John and Garba, to cook and launder. John, who spoke English, Hausa, and Fulani, would also serve as interpreter. A flat tire at the outset collapsed the truck idea, giving credence to the Nigerian adage, “He who travels fast in Africa will not travel far.” The missionaries, somewhat excited by the prospect of trekking, mounted steeds and rode into the sand-filled winds of the seasonal harmattan blowing from the Sahara.

The group maintained a travel speed of about 100 miles per week, passing lizards lurking at anthills, receiving water the color of clay, and once, when farmers complained how guinea fowl were eating their corn, the missionaries shot 11 birds for the entourage to roast and enjoy.

Arriving at Biu, Helser and Kulp visited the British colonial government’s district officer. The missionaries discovered that although more than 260 languages were spoken in northern Nigeria, dialectical similarities allowed about 200,000 within the population to understand Bura. The Bura people were not members of the dominant tribal/ethnic population but helped compose the “common folk,” and held animistic religious beliefs.

The missionaries felt that Biu was the right location for their mission, but the district officer refused approval. An additional trek to provincial headquarters in Maiduguri procured a site in Garkida, next to the Hawal River, 40 miles southeast of Biu. In Garkida, Helser and Kulp would be provided with a mud-and-grass hut until they chose a site to build.

March 17, 1923, is recognized as the founding date of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. On the dawning of this day, Stover, Albert, John, Garba, and a headman with 30 Nigerian workers congregated for the first Christian service conducted in Garkida. It was held to consecrate land for the first building, a house. So that all could understand, one man translated from English to Hausa, and another from Hausa to Bura.

The Church of the Brethren was unique in its approach to missions, focusing on hospitals, schools, and agricultural advancements as it strove to fill churches with healthy and educated

On Dec. 29, 1922, Albert Helser and Stover Kulp pulled into the Nigerian port of Lagos to begin a series of consultations with British colonial officials, missionaries, and educators that would send them by rail to Kaduna, Zaria, and Jos. Recommendations pointed them toward Biu, an isolated area about



Ruth Kulp heading to a Nigerian village in 1924.

“ Risku Madziga, Pilesar Sawa, Njida Gwari, and Ibrahim Shellangwa. Madziga and Sawa were strong leaders within the church, leading people forward into challenges facing the next generation. ”

Albert Helser carried out the first four Brethren baptisms in Nigeria in the community of Garkida.



members fully equipped to do the work of Christ. Albert Helser had received practical medical training in England and now was teaching Stover Kulp what he knew. They set hours for seeing patients and dispensing medicines and soon were giving 100 to 150 treatments a week. A mission farm was started to produce guinea corn, peanuts, and beans.

And Albert and Stover began learning Bura, an unwritten language. Stover wrote down each word phonetically, trying to include nuances of meaning within its definition. He would develop a dictionary and a system of writing through which Bura texts could be written and read in mission schools.

In April, Albert developed yellow fever and was bedfast for 40 days. While keeping him alive, Stover supervised building projects, directed staff, tended the farm, and led church services. Before Albert could recover, Stover caught malaria. John and Garba took assiduous care of both men, leading the missionaries to appreciate the depth of dependence they had upon their Nigerian brothers.

October 1923 was a joyous month. Ruth Kulp and Lola Helser arrived! The couples made an arduous trip from Jos to Garkida that involved a truck accident, Stover's second bout with malaria, and a cross-



Ruth Kulp in London.

country trek that left 28-year-old Ruth alone, caring for Stover while managing cook and carriers.

Work gained momentum. On Dec. 9, Stover preached the first sermon in Bura. Garkida School opened on Dec. 17 with 26 pupils, a figure that would climb to over 160 within several weeks. Early in 1924, Dr. Homer and Marguerite Burke came to take over medical work, providing in-depth care to those suffering from a multitude of illnesses, such as elephantiasis and leprosy, as well as horrific burns and broken bones. A new hospital was dedicated in May.

This resounding success was followed by a deep silence that reverberated within the denomination.

Since Ruth was a student at Juniata, her dream was to be a missionary in Africa. Once there, she passionately threw herself into

her work—studying Bura, teaching children, and helping in the hospital. She became pregnant, and in June, six weeks before the baby's due date, Ruth came down with a severe form of dysentery that caused the premature birth of their son. He died later that day, with Ruth dying soon after. The infant was placed upon Ruth's breast, and together they were buried under a large mahogany tree behind their home. With bowed heads, weeping Bura friends passed by her grave.

Some of Ruth's last words were, "Oh, God, save the Bura people!"

Three years later, in June 1927, four Nigerian men were baptized by Albert Helser in the Hawal River: Risku Madziga, Pilesar Sawa, Njida Gwari, and Ibrahim Shellangwa. Madziga and Sawa were strong leaders within the church, leading people forward into challenges facing the next generation. **M**

Jeanine Wine is archivist for Manchester University in North Manchester, Ind. This is the first in a series of articles that will mark the centennial of Church of the Brethren mission work in Nigeria.



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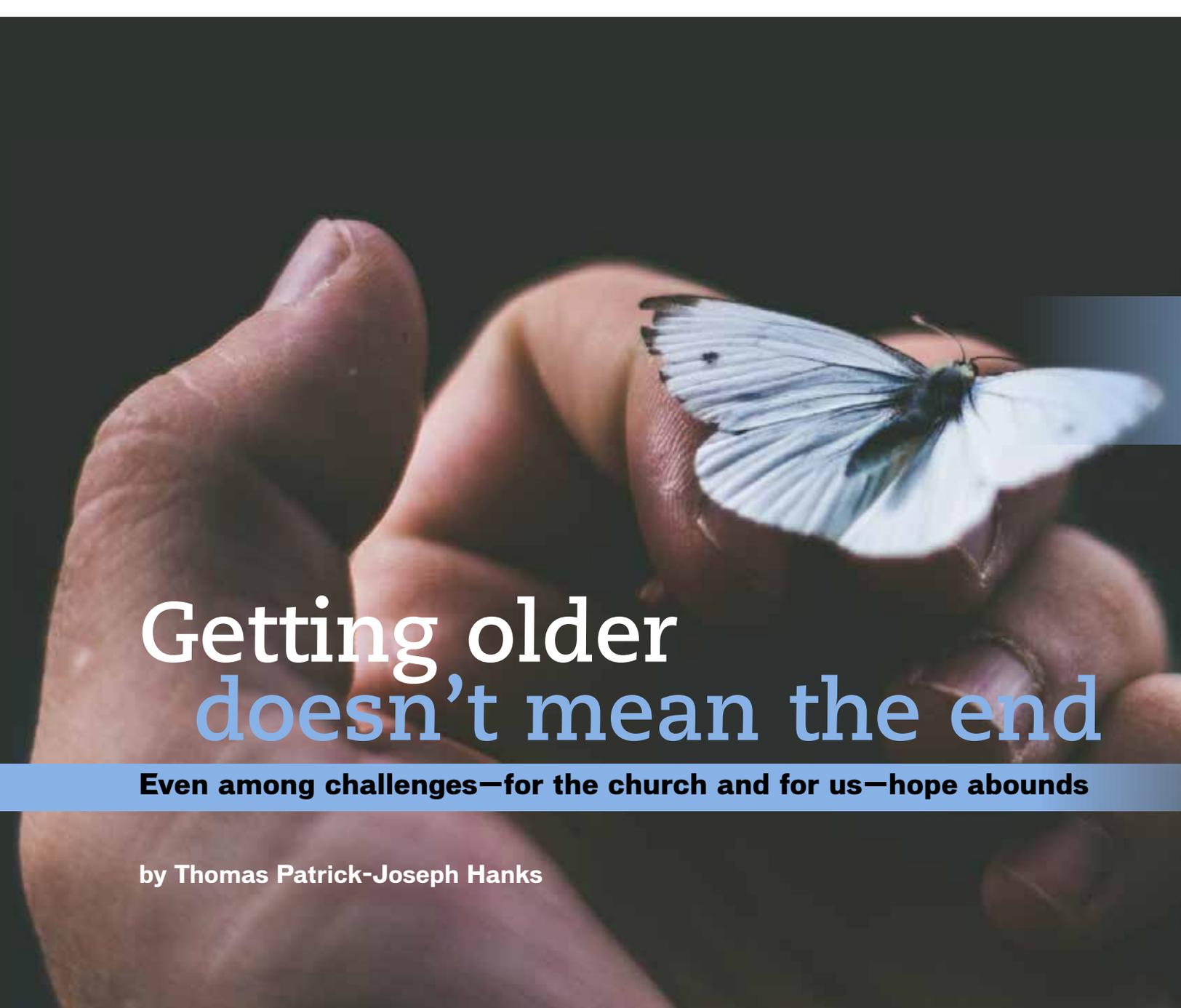
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Getting older doesn't mean the end

Even among challenges—for the church and for us—hope abounds

by Thomas Patrick-Joseph Hanks

When my daughter, Hope, was in kindergarten, her teacher invited her and her classmates to share a little bit about what their parents did for a living. Hope later told me that she told her class: “My mommy works at a hospital, and my daddy tells old people about Jesus all day long, and he is always visiting his friends.”

At first I thought, “What an outrageous way to describe the work of a pastor.” But the more I thought about it, the more my 6-year-old’s statement seemed full of wisdom. Like it or not,

the Church of the Brethren is getting older every day. In every congregation I have ever served there is a sadness about the young people of our denomination leaving the church.

“What can we do about the loss of our youth, pastor?” After 23 years, I’m still scratching my head, wondering how to get young adults who leave the rural communities of their upbringing to remain engaged with a church that is far removed from their worldview and from the places where they settle as they begin to live, work, and raise their families.

Still, I find hope in aging. I once called a local congregation to ask if they would like to send a group to Bethany Seminary’s orientation dinner for new students. The idea was to get several people from the many congregations that surround the seminary community to come and share with the students about their congregation’s ministries, in the hope of helping incoming students make a connection with local congregations while studying at Bethany.

I ended up being completely discouraged—not for the idea, but for the

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church with mostly younger members, but without a church home, to come use their building. Suddenly, the elderly church was rejuvenated. Today it is thriving.



Like my daughter Hope, Jesus was also known for some pretty outrageous, yet wisdom-filled statements during his days on earth. To Peter, in John 21:18, for example, he promised unimagined trauma and death in Peter’s old age:

“I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” (NLT)

John continues by explaining that this was how Peter would ultimately give his life for the church.

When I was a 17-year-old high school student, I imagined that Jesus would return before this saying came true for me. But now, I have achieved the famous age about which the Beatles sang: 64. I don’t know why I never imagined that being old would be such a challenge.

It was tough news to hear my neurologist tell me the reason that my

hand trembled, that my memory was beginning to fail, and that I was being visited by golden angels at night. She told me that I suffered from Parkinson’s disease with related psychosis and dementia. I couldn’t believe it. The nightly visitors seemed more like a vision in answer to years of prayers than a psychotic symptom.

Forgetfulness is a natural progression of age, just as a tremor can be. But as I learned more about Parkinson’s disease, I realized the sad truth of the diagnosis. Over the three years since that news, my tremor has worsened, my memory has shortened, and I have developed the short shuffling gait that is a hallmark of Parkinson’s. Yet I dream the most awe-inspiring dreams.

I finally had to retire in April (a year and a half early) because my memory had worsened to the point that I was having a hard time remembering sermons, important meetings, or visits. In short, I had grown ineffective in the work of a pastor.

To their credit, the two congregations I was serving at the time were willing to let me work as long as I could. Even when the neurologist took away my driver’s license and I could no longer drive to “visit all my friends” as I should, the deacons offered to drive me for hospital visits. Despite their obvious love for me and appreciation for the ministry I provided, I could see the handwriting on the wall.

In January, I tendered the 90 days’

congregation. The person I called, sounding just as discouraged as I was, confessed: “We’re just a very small congregation consisting of mostly elderly people. We don’t have anything to offer young people moving into our community.”

I have prayed for that group of elderly saints many times since then. What despair that a Christian faith community didn’t feel it had anything to offer. Then, last year, I read an article about that same congregation. The article told of how that dwindling, elderly community invited a new

“ I pray that each elderly sister or brother in our denomination can begin to see that we’re all wearing out, we’re all aging for a reason: to find the ultimate fulfillment of our faith in Jesus. ”

notice of my retirement required by my employment contract and started filling out disability insurance forms, as well as forms for Social Security disability benefits. All of these were rejected because I was still working at the time. After I retired, I was rejected for the disability insurance benefits because I was retired. I traded in our spacious parsonage for a two-bedroom unit in a government-subsidized housing facility. Since then, my family is living off a hardship grant from the Church Workers’ Assistance Plan, my Eder Financial pension, and my wife’s Social Security.

I have become one of those old people my daughter talked about. One might feel sorry for me and imagine that I no longer have a purpose or a reason to live. After all, I need help getting dressed now. And I have to be driven everywhere by my beautiful wife, Adele. I can no longer do the work that I loved for 23 years, nor can I do the work that I did for the 13 years before that, teaching.

I guess I could sit around, take my pills, and watch TV all day, waiting for Jesus to come back or for my own death. But that same Jesus who predicted the suffering and death associated with old age also promised in Matthew 28:20 to be with me, “always—to the end of the age.” That means that he will be with me even after I have forgotten the names of my wife and child—for as long as I live.



I am not the first person to suffer from Parkinson’s disease. I’m not the

first to struggle with memory issues. I’m certainly not the first person to struggle on a fixed income after retirement. Nor am I the first to experience what I believe to be God-given dreams and visions. The doctor says that those dreams are a symptom of my disease. I prefer to think that God has allowed me to see golden angels and have visions to comfort me during the next chapter of my life. I prefer to think they are signs that God has not abandoned me, and that I still have meaningful work to do in this life.

Getting older is nothing new. Physically, we change from the moment of our birth. First, we grow into those beautiful people that we are in our late teens and early 20s. Then, after what seems like a very short time, we begin to notice that our hair starts graying, that our formerly smooth skin starts to wrinkle and spot. Next, we wonder how it could be possible that we are already filling out Medicare applications, or watching our first Social Security payments being deposited to our checking accounts. Suddenly, we find ourselves wondering, “Did I save enough for retirement? Do I have enough insurance? What will happen if I outlive my money?” Since 2011, about 10,000 people in the United States turn 65 each day! So, I am certainly not alone.

From my point of view, my body may be older, it may slowly be wearing out, my organs may be deteriorating. But by God’s reckoning, since I gave my life to Christ, I extended my lifespan from 70 or 80 years to eternity. As

a verse of “Amazing Grace” says:

*Yea, when this heart
and flesh shall fail
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess within the veil
A life of health and peace.*

Sure, when my back aches, or my vision dims, when I can’t find my cane or when I cannot remember that woman’s name, I could complain to God. But instead, I have all the more reason to trust in God. Each wrinkle, each spot, each gray hair, each symptom, each forgotten memory reminds me that Jesus promised that he would be with me always. Jesus knows each sorrow. Jesus knows the reason for every tear.

The day is coming closer daily when God will wipe away all my tears. On that day I’ll have a beautiful, new, spiritual body which will never grow old; instead, I will live forever, without pain, without suffering, to rejoice in God’s presence surrounded by each person who ever loved me or prayed for me over the years.

From this spiritual perspective, suddenly, being old sounds more like a blessing than a curse. Maybe the church is getting grayer, balder, and more stooped in her old age. Still, I pray that each elderly sister or brother in our denomination can begin to see that we’re all wearing out, we’re all aging for a reason: to find the ultimate fulfillment of our faith in Jesus—abundant, healthy, eternal life. Isn’t that kind of faith a great gift to share? 

Thomas Patrick-Joseph Hanks is a retired pastor in the Church of the Brethren. He lives in Williamsburg, Pa.

A realistic path for peace

New book by Robert Johansen is highlighted at Notre Dame symposium

During the week before his crucifixion, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem that they failed to recognize “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42). And as Jesus foretold in his apocalyptic remarks, the inability to navigate political realities led to the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

Robert C. Johansen, a member of Crest Manor Church of the Brethren (South Bend, Ind.), has spent much of his professional life exploring the things that make for peace with his students at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. His most recent book, *Where the Evidence Leads: A Realistic Strategy for Peace and Human Security*, was celebrated with a day-long book symposium on Aug. 25, featuring four international panels of educators, students, and real-world peacemakers.



FRANK RAMIREZ

In his book, Johansen contends that the centuries-old habits of so-called political realism that leads to war have proven unrealistic when it comes to promoting the welfare of people. He explores how to develop new strategies that create peace as well as a better life for the largest number of people, which he says is actually the most realistic way of creating political security.

Moderator Erin Corcoran, executive director of the Kroc Institute and faculty member of the Keough School of Global Affairs, referred to Johansen as “one of the pillars of the Kroc Institute (who is) considered one of the founding members. Although he is an emeritus, he is in no way retired.” In her opening remarks, Corcoran reflected on Johansen’s term “enlightened self-interest” that calls for looking “beyond our own immediate self-interest.”

Each panel focused on a different topic within the book and current issues, sharing perspectives and interacting with Johansen on the themes they raised.

One such conversation, on “empirical realism,” dismissed conventional wisdom that insists the only realistic way to

create national security is military buildup. Johansen commented, “One of the keys to improving the world is listening carefully to what one another has to say. It is so difficult for people of advantage who have privileges not to think they are superior to . . . people who have had far less opportunities. Talent is spread much more equally around the world than opportunity.”

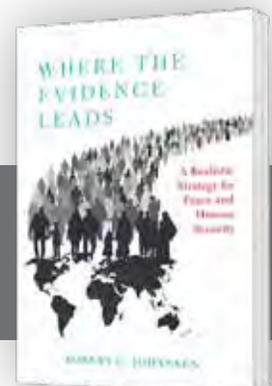
On several occasions, concern was expressed about environmental issues that may lead to mass migration and warfare. “Environmental issues may draw us together,” Johansen said. “The human species has a common destiny. Some of our optimism about that has been quashed by the realization that the consequences of environmental problems are not equally distributed.”

Questions were also taken from students in the audience as well as from those watching online. On more than one occasion Johansen responded by stating he did not know the answer. At one point he added, “The answers are usually with the oppressed. If we can communicate with the oppressed and hear them and deliver for them then we have a coalition that’s going to provide the friction that’s needed to make the change.” He paused, then said, “I think.”

In response to those who questioned whether nonviolence is a viable option when it comes to changing the world, Johansen replied, “I’m still persuaded . . . one thing I don’t want to do in life, I don’t really want to kill somebody else.”

Whatever one’s view, he suggested it is imperative we do something. “We have a choice to continuing the path we’re on or getting off of it,” he said. “If we . . . do absolutely nothing I think the future is really grim. I think it’s likely nuclear weapons will spread. I think it’s likely nuclear weapons will be used. I think terrorism will continue to recur. I think the environment will cause enormous human suffering. . . . I think this is the future if activists don’t do enough soon enough. So the reason I remain hopeful is if enough people become aware.” 

Frank Ramirez is pastor of Union Center Church of the Brethren, Nappanee, Ind.



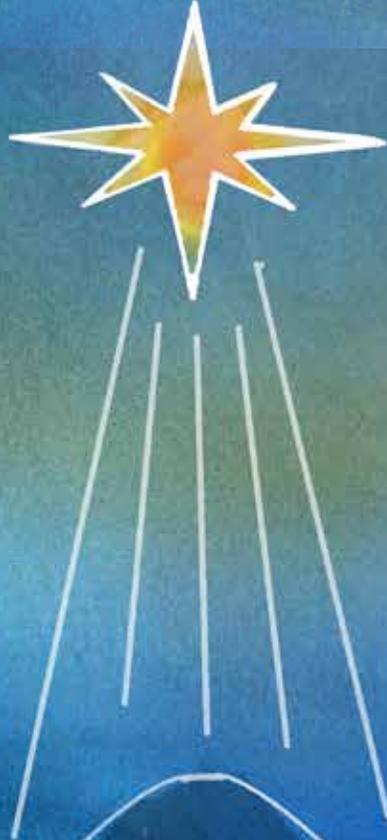
ABOUT THE BOOK

Where the Evidence Leads: A Realistic Strategy for Peace and Human Security (Oxford University Press, 2021) is available at www.brethrenpress.com. List price \$34.95. Recordings of the symposium are available on YouTube.

Glory to God

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. —Luke 2:15-20





The trouble with Christmas

by Chris Bowman

Plummetering stock markets, skyrocketing inflation, supply-chain disasters, and information wars (not to mention real ones) all suggest that Christmas is in trouble this year.

But think about it: It wouldn't be Christmas if it weren't in trouble.

We forget that, for Christians, the joy of Christmas comes because of the trouble. The good news of God's incarnation is in response to our problems, not our success. And when we forget the trouble that Jesus redeems, we miss the promise his birth represents. It's disingenuous to sing of a savior while forgetting that we need one.

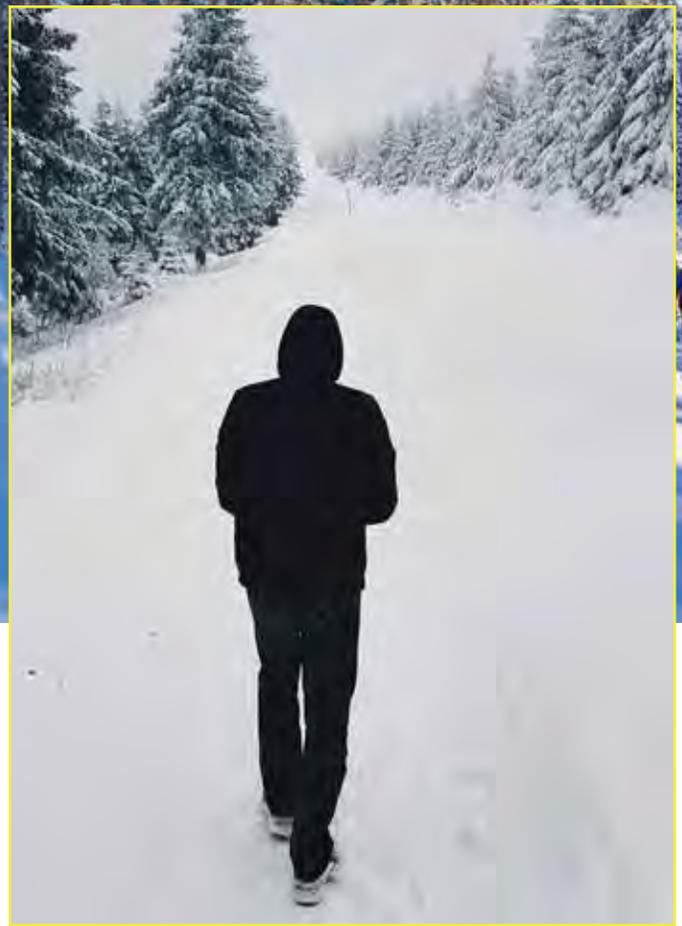
It's hard to pray for light when we've become so acclimated to dark.

That's why Advent—the preparation—isn't just a historic event; it's a current invitation. John the Baptist, back then, and his spiritual descendants today, remind us that “the preparation” and “the promised” are joined at the hip. The Christmas story and the Advent story are the same story. The preparation chapters help notice, name, and participate in the incarnation of God's love.

Yes, Christmas is unimaginable hope: a virgin birth, a king born in a stable, nonviolent grace swaddling a new world order, kinship carved from covenant.

And to help us get ready for God's ready help, the Advent season celebrates the gift of the promise as much as the product. Advent imagines the unimaginable. The messenger prepares for the Messiah, a heads-up to what's about to happen; a warning to focus our gaze; “a herald, forerunner in the way,” the old hymn says . . . like rototilling the garden before the seeds are sown.

Advent reminds us to watch for God's messengers in partnership with God's Anointed. They're a package deal. Messengers reduce our fear, redirect our energies, and anticipate the coming hope with honest and glad expectation. The Messiah invites our embrace and participation



in God's saving, transforming, life-giving, self-giving love.

So, where does this word of preparation come from? How does it sound? And why does it matter?

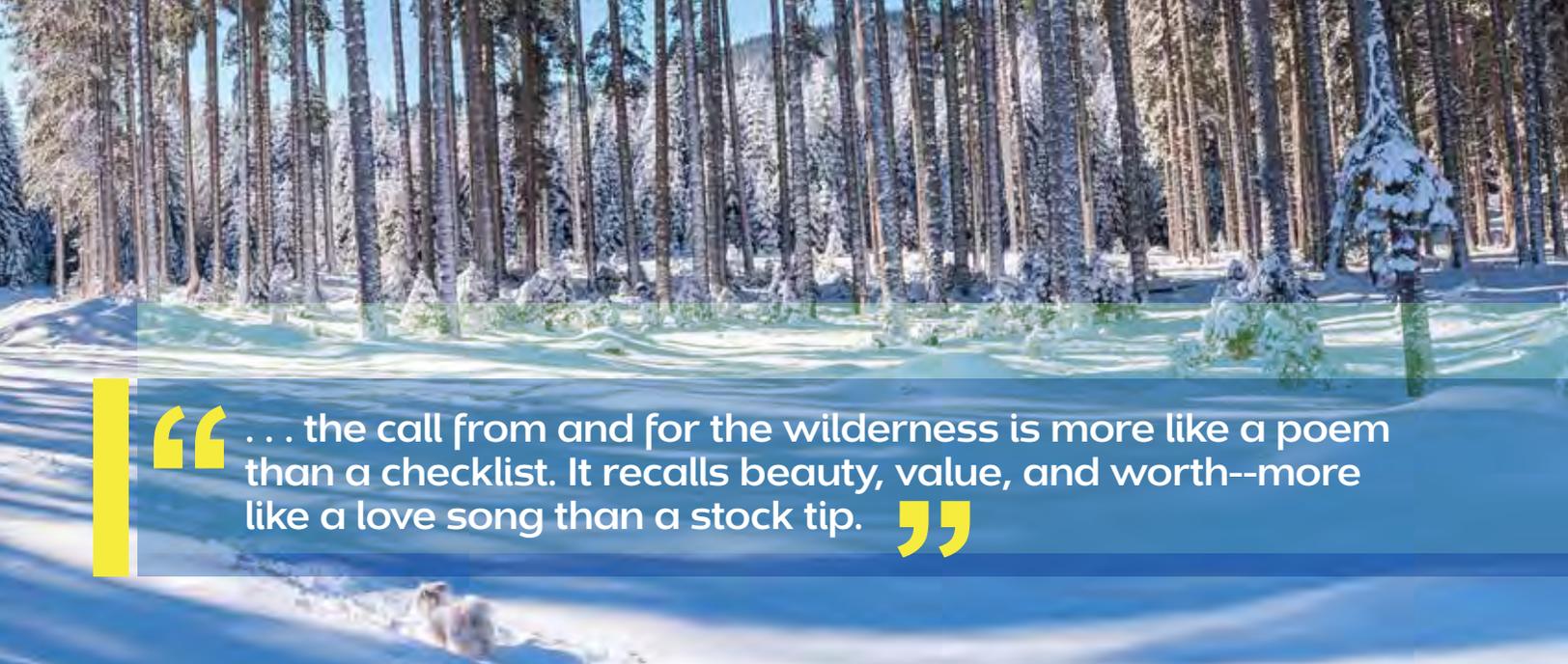
Our Gospel reading has a fun little play on words about where the voice of preparation comes from. In Isaiah, the voice cries to prepare in the wilderness. In Luke the voice comes out of the wilderness. The voice is calling either *from* the wilderness or *to* the wilderness.

The beauty of this ambiguity is that both directions are relevant and right to different people at different times. Sometimes the cry comes out of the wilderness; sometimes the cry is into wildernesses.

We remember that biblical wildernesses are both geographic and metaphoric. Deserted places, desolate, outside the boundaries, they are places of disorder and danger, the home of brigands and wild beasts. They are dark nights of the soul, depression's interlude, renegotiations outside the boundaries of comfortable acquiescence, invitations to physical, spiritual, or emotional relocation.

Wildernesses are places one goes through to get from where we were to where we need to be. Remember, in the book of Exodus, the wilderness is where the children of Israel became the people of Israel. In Isaiah, the war refugees fled into the wilderness. And it was into the wilderness that Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit to confirm and define his ministry beyond temptation.

Some look at the biblical specifics as authentication (“In the fifteenth year of . . . Emperor Tiberius, when



“ . . . the call from and for the wilderness is more like a poem than a checklist. It recalls beauty, value, and worth—more like a love song than a stock tip. ”

Pontius Pilate governed Judea, and Herod ruled Galilee, and his brother Philip was over Ituraea's Trachonitis region, and Lysanias ruled Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas . . .”). But in biblical stories, while details locate God's redeeming Word in history, they're never meant to trap it there.

The Advent messenger's voice still cries to our details just as it did to theirs. Out of and into every wilderness, now as then, God provides a Messiah and a messenger.

And how does that cry of preparation sound?

It seems to me that the call from and for the wilderness is more like a poem than a checklist. It recalls beauty, value, and worth—more like a love song than a stock tip. It's more an invitation to be part of what God is up to than an insider tip on how to beat others to the goodies.

It sounds like the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying out, ‘in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

This isn't some grand infrastructure bill or earth-moving project. It's an invitation to observe, contemplate, and participate in God's level playing field. The call to *recognize* and *return* (or as John the Baptist worded it, *repent*)—the voice back then is the same here and now. So notice: into and out of which wilderness are today's messengers crying out?

There's plenty to notice, after all. We live in a world where justice has become politicized, self-defense is favored over self-giving, poverty is cast as laziness, greed has slipped off the list of deadly sins. Community takes a back seat to liberty.

In the middle of this troublous mess, Advent invites us to consider:

Which valleys need to be filled? Which mountains

made low?

Where are the crooked places? Which ones are rough?

How is God calling us to a path where *all* flesh will see salvation?

This matters because we miss the miracle too easily when we're looking the opposite direction.

In our modern culture, the very thing that Advent is designed to do is almost impossible to get done. Especially nowadays in the North American context, we've completely domesticated Advent.

Back in the day, the wait-ful-ness of winter's barren trees invited us to consider the eb and flow of life.

Nowadays, the barren, leaf-dropping trees in my neighborhood are filled with ribbons, reindeer, and lights so bright they can be seen from space.

The voice of Advent matters now as much as it did then. Where John the Baptist was counting down the days before Christ, we're counting shopping days before Christmas. Where John cries out for a mountain-leveling God, our ears are filled with ho-ho-holiday shopping music. The very season created for self-reflective preparation is now consumed by distractions of biblical proportions.

We've turned wilderness into Walmart.

This is why Advent is so important. And it's why John-the-Baptist-Sunday is so relevant. That which we notice and pay attention to—the messengers we heed and the messiahs we hope in—these become the heart of our stories and the worlds in which we participate and the life for which we petition.

The messenger and the Messiah come together in the service of God. Together they invite a new reality knit together through the observation, contemplation, and creation of life. 

Chris Bowman, an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren, lives in Manassas, Va. This article is adapted from a sermon preached at Washington (D.C.) City Church of the Brethren.



A tradition of big-hearted respect

Reflections on 10 years as Annual Conference secretary

by James M. Beckwith

As I looked out over the delegate body this past summer at Annual Conference, a long-held sense of being in the right place washed over me afresh. These are my people. This is my church family. I belong here.

That has been a painful awareness at times, because sometimes members of our church family have expressed hardened partisan judgmentalism akin to the world around us. It has become difficult to have conversations in which anyone genuinely listens with an open heart and compassion to what people in other camps are thinking and feeling. I long for us to earnestly desire to understand aspects of truth that others have encountered, so we can discern God's guidance with hearts open to all that the Lord wants to say to the church.

We are like the blind men who

encountered an elephant in an ancient Indian parable. Each touched a part of the elephant and was totally convinced that he knew the true essence of the elephant. They argued against other's convictions about what an elephant is.

Being a part of Annual Conference from early childhood on, I felt sure I belonged to a people who did not act that way. We were a diverse people who truly sought to be family with one another. Some dressed plain, some spoke softly while others preached forcefully from scripture during business session debates, many took time to greet a young boy who was taking it all in, and everyone called each other brother and sister.

I was convinced that God was glad that we were bringing our varied perspectives to bear on the topic at hand and were learning from each other, helping each other get a bigger picture

about how God wants to be at work through us. It was a wonderful, safe place to feel at home with virtually everyone. That is how I continue to want to view my church family. It is Christ's church, we are all God's people, and we all belong together.

I still experience that fairly often. When I pray for the differing people of our church, God calms my aggravations and reminds me that the Spirit of the Risen Lord is like the wind that blows wherever it wants (John 3:8). God can and does work through diverse people, as a study of scripture teaches us, and the Spirit works in mysterious ways.

It has been good to be part of a daily prayer calendar among denominational and district leaders. What I will miss the most as I retire from my tenure as Annual Conference secretary is working with all the people who have become such dear sisters



“As we consider ways of doing Annual Conference differently, I pray we will find ways to respect how God is at work in each of our lives.”



Glenn Regel

and brothers in Christ. When we view each other as friends and partners in Christ's service, we learn to see through each other's eyes and ache with each other's hearts.

Each year when Standing Committee meets, how awesome it is when the 30-plus representatives from our districts work their way through to recommendations that could never have been discovered without the honest and firm confrontation of various perspectives. At our best, we are a body of Christ in which no part of the body is ignored as being unimportant (as 1 Corinthians 12 teaches). Sometimes we have had sharp debate and closely contested votes.

What has convinced me that we are different from this world's politics are those times when delegates sat back stunned after a very close vote, uncomfortable that some felt victorious while others felt rejected.

Spiritually sensitive souls have asked whether we might take time to pray about what happened, give space to ponder how the Lord would lead in this divisive situation, and then come back to talk about it again.

Several times I have witnessed a gracious renewal of listening with heartfelt yearning to discern common ground. In those moments, I believe we have truly become sisters and brothers together as God's family. It has been wonderful to feel the Lord leading us to a different way of proceeding.

I wonder how we might find ways to challenge ourselves to pursue discussions like that. We are a Brethren family. We have documented our tradition of offering big-hearted respect while holding strongly to our convictions.

The 2017 paper on authority and accountability reviews how Annual Conference decisions have called us to honor other's perspectives while fervently seeking to help our body of Christ be faithful to truths the Lord is revealing to us. We do not disown family members. Rather, we seek to respectfully persuade each other of the validity of the truths we have discerned together through our studies of scripture and our experiences of God's guidance.

As Jesus said, it will be our love for one another that will let everyone know that we are his disciples (John 13:35). We will love each other so deeply that we will give full witness to our piece of God's truth, and we will love each other so deeply that we will respect other pieces of God's truth that our sisters and our brothers insist we

take into account in our discernment.

Praying for each other and listening with open hearts and minds helps us engage others in conversations that feel safe for everyone. I pray we will find ways to support those who are wrestling with issues that other church members do not fully understand.

I remember a conversation with Hispanic Brethren leadership some years ago about how they might bring to the wider church their concern for undocumented people in their congregations and communities. As I recall, they were not asking the delegate body to tell them what to do. But they wanted the delegates to listen, share insights from scripture, and pray with them about this aspect of their ministries—then continue to pray for them after returning home. Could the other delegates yearn to hear at the next Conference how God was working among the Hispanic congregations during the coming year?

As we consider ways of doing Annual Conference differently, I pray we will find ways to respect how God is at work in each of our lives. Then, I believe, our diverse members will know that they are in the right place—in the gathering of God's people, a body of Christ that helps each member desire to be faithful in diverse settings. I want each Annual Conference attendee to look out across our gatherings able to affirm from their most inward being: *“These are my people. We belong together.”* 

This year James M. Beckwith completed 10 years as Annual Conference secretary. He was moderator of Annual Conference in 2008 and has also served terms on Standing Committee for two different districts.

God has exalted the lowly

Luke 1:46-55

by Duane Grady

Location, location, location
Mary's song of joy, known as the Magnificat, is understood differently depending on the setting. If read in a fancy hotel room among ritzy buildings in a well-to-do location such as Maui or Rodeo Drive, the words might stick and stutter in your throat.

Among the rich and famous, images of the proud being scattered, the mighty being pulled down, and the rich being sent away empty can confuse the mind and unsettle the soul—the same soul that God magnified in Mary.

Mary's soul is magnified because she didn't grow up among haughty people,

and thus the words take on a joyful tone. You can try it yourself. Take a bus to a neighborhood with boarded-up buildings and broken streetlights. Look around and sit a spell. Allow your senses to take it in, especially your senses of smell and hearing. Then read these words to yourself very slowly: "God has exalted the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

You will be forgiven if you wonder when all this will happen. It is a promise that has future implications. God is busy making radical changes in the world, but this never seems to happen on our timeline. But I invite you to have an in-this-time experience. Read this scripture, all of it, in two different settings as mentioned above. You won't likely have to travel far. Just find the wealthiest location and read the words. Then do the same thing in an impoverished community. Take note of the emotional difference and experience.

While we are waiting, come

Some among us are not gifted with waiting, especially for divine promises that never seem to materialize. If you know these visceral feelings, take heart. The beginning of Mary's song will be more to your liking. Yes, there is a reference to what will happen at a later date ("henceforth all generations will call me blessed"). But start at the beginning. Now, in *this* moment, Mary is magnified and her spirit rejoices. She has been regarded, and God has done great things for her because God is holy.

These affirmations are a far cry from our introduction to Mary, who is greatly troubled when Gabriel brings the news of her favored status. When she hears that God's presence in her life means that she is to bear a child, we can forgive her for skipping over the great things this child will do and wondering, "How can this be?" I never hear these words without adding in my

Mystical Conversation by Odilon Redon

“ Here they are, two women of unequal age and life experience, both caught up on the latest drama and hope that God was bringing to their people after years of desolation and fear. ”

mind what I assume she might have been thinking, “How can this be *good*?”

All it takes for Mary to shift her thinking is a little time to take in the news and a visit with her older kinswoman, Elizabeth. She starts her journey troubled and emotionally confused. Mary is not unaware of God’s promises for her people, and she has memorized the prayer song of Hannah, mother of Samuel, which she now proclaims.

The turning point in her journey from confusion to faith occurs in the presence of Elizabeth. Perhaps it was seeing Elizabeth, pregnant with a surprising gift of new life within her. Here they are, two women of unequal age and life experience, both caught up on the latest drama and hope that God was bringing to their people after years of desolation and fear.

These things are at work in this meeting as each woman brings her faith to bear witness along with the presence of the Holy Spirit. We should not be surprised at the power that emanates from the lips of Mary nor that this same power is at work in our world today.

A special Christmas Eve

Pastor Bob had grown to dislike Christmas Eve. The church where he served held two candlelight services, one at 7 p.m. and the other ending at midnight. Each service had a full house and, in the dim light, Pastor Bob could see that many of those in attendance were not people he knew or recognized from regular Sunday services. He felt pressure to provide a meaningful and “special” worship event. In the five years he had been pastor of this church, the Christmas Eve service had started to feel too familiar and trite. This service bore a stark resemblance to the cheap grace of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Even without two worship services, Christmas Eve was a hectic day. The church offered boxes of food and treats

to its neighbors, and Pastor Bob, along with Deacon Shirley, hand-delivered them to 35 homes. It was an impossible task that could only be completed if Bob and Shirley split up the list and went their separate ways. Bob wanted it to feel like a sincere service project, but he was burdened by an unfinished sermon and the simple reality that there was a lot to do in too short a time.

His angst deepened because he had never liked the idea of connecting sugar cookies to the birth of the world’s savior. “How will people ever grasp the divine meaning for their lives and comprehend the wonder of the Christ Child if all we do is fling food and packaged treats at them,” he muttered aloud as he drove from one low-income house to another. Shirley had taken the deliveries to the nursing homes, and Pastor Bob was stuck going to homes in the undesirable section of town. Lord knows, he didn’t want to be there.

It gets dark early on Christmas Eve, and Bob had two more deliveries to go. All this rushing around and fake pretending of joy he shared at each delivery was not helping improve his sermon. Bob still needed to drive home, shower, dress, and fake pretend that Christmas Eve was his favorite time of the year. It was not as if he hadn’t done that before.

All his plans were tossed aside at his next to final delivery. Three children met Bob’s knock on the door, none older than seven. When Bob realized that these kids were home alone without adult supervision, he knew he couldn’t leave. He could imagine no good scenarios, and his frustration and anxiety grew by the second. All Pastor Bob could think to do was to invite the children to sit on or near his lap while he read one of the

children’s books in the gift box he was delivering.

He hadn’t read more than a few pages when the children’s grandmother arrived, sputtering excuses about a stalled car and a long wait for a taxi. Frankly, he didn’t care as he struggled to extricate himself from the situation as quickly as possible so that he could continue with the agenda that cluttered his mind. As he was leaving, one of the children, a four-year-old girl, asked him a question he would hear in his mind for the next 42 years. She asked, “Mister, are you, Jesus?” “Thank you so much,” said the grandmother.

Pastor Bob does not remember much about the Christmas Eve services that night. People tell him worship went very well and that his message was meaningful. All he remembers from the time he left that house until sometime the next day is the girl’s haunting question. How could he possibly respond? Who was this child, and why was she placed into his life?

During the second service, a few minutes before midnight, he also remembers how he felt the weight of his pride and the burden of emptiness. At that moment, he was more open to blessing by the Mighty One than at any other time in his life. He felt a slow and powerful lifting up, and an ever-flowing stream of mercy.

Pastor Bob opened a precious gift that would never leave him that Christmas Day. He knew the answer to the girl’s question and would often proclaim it in the years to come. “No, I am not Jesus. But I know who is, and that makes all the difference in the world. Would you like to know him also?” ❧

Duane Grady is a retired Church of the Brethren minister living in Goshen, Ind.



Denomination's board adopts 2023 budget

A 2023 budget for the ministries of the Church of the Brethren topped actions taken by the Mission and Ministry Board at its fall meeting. Carl Fike chaired the meeting, with chair-elect Colin Scott.

A “grand total” budget of \$8,538,570 in income and \$8,529,600 in expense was approved. This includes budgets for Core Ministries, Brethren Disaster Ministries, Annual Conference Office, Global Food Initiative, and Material Resources.

The action included a Core Ministries balanced budget of \$5,336,000, representing a \$119,000 increase of the parameter previously set. Considerations included, among others, the inflationary economy, a 3 percent cost-of-living increase in employee pay, anticipation of higher travel costs and expenses as staff return to pre-pandemic operations, and a new executive director position to oversee Discipleship Ministries and the Office of Ministry.

A year-to-date financial report showed congregational giving to the denomination has remained relatively stable as compared to last year, and individual giving has increased over 2021.

In other business

Kathy Mack of Northern Plains District was named the next chair-elect, to start



Cheryl Burnhough-Cayford

The Mission and Ministry Board with general secretary David Steele: (from left) Steele, Rosanna Eller McFadden, Paul Schrock, Lauren Seganos Cohen, Heather Gentry Hartwell, Josiah Ludwick, Joel Peña, chair-elect Colin Scott, Meghan Horne Mauldin, chair Carl Fike, Karen Shively Neff, John Hoffman, Joanna Wave Willoughby, Michaela Alphonse, Joel Gibbel, Kathy Mack, J. Roger Schrock, Barbara Daté. Not pictured: ex officio members.

mid-year 2023. Her two-year term as chair starts at the close of the 2025 Annual Conference.

Revisions of the guidelines for the Brethren Faith in Action Fund, which gives grants to congregations and camps, included a new sliding scale for matching funds.

Strategic Plan progress reports focused on initiatives related to racism and discipleship. The board discussed

Kingian nonviolence training for board and staff.

“Decommissioning” of the self-allocation process for congregations was announced. Mission Advancement staff will work on alternative means to engage congregations.

A board development session on “Peacemaking in a Polarized Church” was led by Samuel Sarpiya, a past moderator of Annual Conference.



A newly formed Standing with People of Color Committee

met via Zoom in September to begin work on a two-year study/action process that will run through the 2025 Annual Conference. The committee includes (top row, from left) Bruce Rosenberger of the Southern Ohio and Kentucky District's Racial Justice Team; LaDonna Sanders Nkosi, director of Intercultural Ministries; Annual Conference director Rhonda Pittman Gingrich; (center row) Matt Guynn of On Earth Peace; Christy Schaub and Lucas Keller of the district team; (bottom row) Jennifer Quijano West of Standing Committee. Not pictured: Robert Jackson of the district team. Email the committee at standingwithpeopleofcolor@brethren.org.



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(Left) Flooding in northeast Nigeria.

(Below) Nearly six weeks after Hurricane Fiona, small areas in Puerto Rico were still without water or electricity. Members of Puerto Rico District helped clear roads to allow distributions of food and drinking water. Several church members formed a "mini recovery team" to clear roads of trees and boulders and free power lines from branches.

Zaherha Mousa / EVN

Disaster efforts respond to Hurricanes Ian and Fiona

Church of the Brethren disaster relief programs have responded to Hurricane Ian in Florida and Hurricane Fiona in Puerto Rico.

Brethren Disaster Ministries partnered with Puerto Rico District to respond to Hurricane Fiona. In Florida, the program worked with Atlantic Southeast District following Hurricane Ian.

Congregations in Florida reported relatively minor damage to churches including North Fort Myers church, Lehigh Acres Gospel Assembly, Arcadia church, and Sebring church. Some church members were affected by flooding.

Puerto Rico District reconvened its Recovery Committee and disaster coordinator José Acevedo and district executive José Calleja Otero were in communication with the churches to assess and respond to needs. No major damage to structures and no major injuries were reported in the district.

The biggest impact in Puerto Rico was on agriculture, in addition to power and water outages. Discussions have begun between the district, Brethren Disaster Ministries, the Global Food Initiative, and Heifer International on how to support small farmers.

A \$5,000 Emergency Disaster Fund grant enabled the district to deliver food and drinking water in several areas.

Children's Disaster Services deployed volunteer teams to the Fort Myers and Orlando areas, and coordinated with partner organization Child Life Disaster Response. Child Life's local team gave care to about 30 children per day at the Hertz Arena shelter in Estero, Fla., starting in early October. During that time, CDS worked

with the Red Cross to find housing and rental cars for its teams to deploy.

CDS teams later completed two weeks in a shelter in Fort Myers and nine days in a shelter in Orlando. In North Fort Myers, CDS volunteers worked at the Del Tura Shelter, which housed some 560 people after the Hertz Arena and Estero Recreation Center shelters were combined into one. That team saw 25 to 30 children per day, in a deployment that ended in early November.

Material Resources sent several shipments of aid to cities in Florida on behalf of Church World Service: blankets, school kits, and baby kits to Arcadia; hygiene kits, toothpaste, and cleanup buckets to Englewood; blankets and school kits to Orlando; cleanup buckets to Cape Coral; blankets, hygiene kits, toothpaste, and cleanup buckets to Naples. Blankets, baby kits, school kits, hygiene kits, and toothpaste were shipped to Puerto Rico.

Grants from the Emergency Disaster Fund: \$50,000 to the Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development for food vouchers and medical support for vulnerable Lebanese families, education for Syrian child refugees, and food assistance for migrant workers.

\$11,000 to the South Sudan mission for distributions of food, water, and medicines to people displaced by violence.

\$10,000 to the Church of the Brethren in Uganda for a flood relief program helping 300 households.

\$10,000 to the Center for Caring Empowerment and Peace Initiatives (CCEPI) in Nigeria for programing and fees to register land for a new administrative building.

\$10,000 to l'Eglise des Freres au Congo (Church of the Brethren in the Democratic Republic of Congo) for a feeding program at the Munigi camp for displaced people.

\$5,000 to the Disaster Relief Management of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) for a response to flooding in Borno and Adamawa states.

\$5,000 to l'Eglise des Freres au Congo to meet basic needs of 1,200 people including 500 displaced people, 200 elderly people, 200 orphans, and 300 church leaders and members.

\$5,000 to Rwanda Church of the Brethren to feed and provide soap for 100 vulnerable children and their families in the Gisenyi area.

Grants from the Global Food Initiative: \$15,100 to the Church of the Brethren in Rwanda to purchase a grain mill.

\$12,000 to Asociación Iglesia de Los Hermanos Venezuela (ASIGLEH, the Church of the Brethren in Venezuela) for agricultural micro-projects.

\$7,500 to l'Eglise des Freres du Congo for Seed Projects that resulted from Transformation Tree trainings provided by World Relief.



Jason Martinez

“ We must reckon with our past in order to create a brighter future, to do better, and to be better. ”

Led to find out more

Thank you for publishing “If Only That Were True” by Gimbiya Kettering in the September MESSENGER. While I always find Kettering’s writing poignant and thoughtful, this was the first time in a long time that an article led me to go find out more about the subject matter.

I have been only tangentially aware of the celebration that happens at Antietam on an annual basis. I have thought that we, as Brethren, were a

non-slaveholding group, and I even thought that we went as far as being abolitionist. As Kettering argues, if that were true then why did the subject come up again and again at our annual meeting? If it was a settled issue, and if we were of one mind, the repeated discussion wouldn’t have been necessary. She also argues that there is more to our history than the white Brethren narrative that helps us to feel good about ourselves today.

This article has led me to look into

the lives and experiences of Samuel Weir and Mattie Cunningham Dolby, to name two, in order to see what brothers and sisters of color had to say about what was true in their own lives. I feel it is important that we learn our own true stories and that we cease telling ourselves fairy tales that may make us feel better about the way things were. We must reckon with our past in order to create a brighter future, to do better, and to be better.

Josiah Ludwick
Harrisburg, Pa.

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Increasing the divide

I want to commend those who had a hand in the planning of the two Church of the Brethren conferences that I had the pleasure of attending this summer, Annual Conference and National Youth Conference.

Both conferences were inspiring with great sermons by thoughtful preachers who all did a very good job at helping us focus on our compelling vision rather than those topics that divide us. Annual Conference moderator David Sollenberger did a wonderful job of running the business, using his own distinct sense of humor.

Sadly, the close of Annual Conference left many feeling like the idea of focusing on what connects us instead of what would divide us was just an illusion. The statement by incoming moderator Tim McElwee really caused Conference to end on a negative note instead of a positive one, and probably did more to increase the rift within the church than anything we have seen over the past few years.

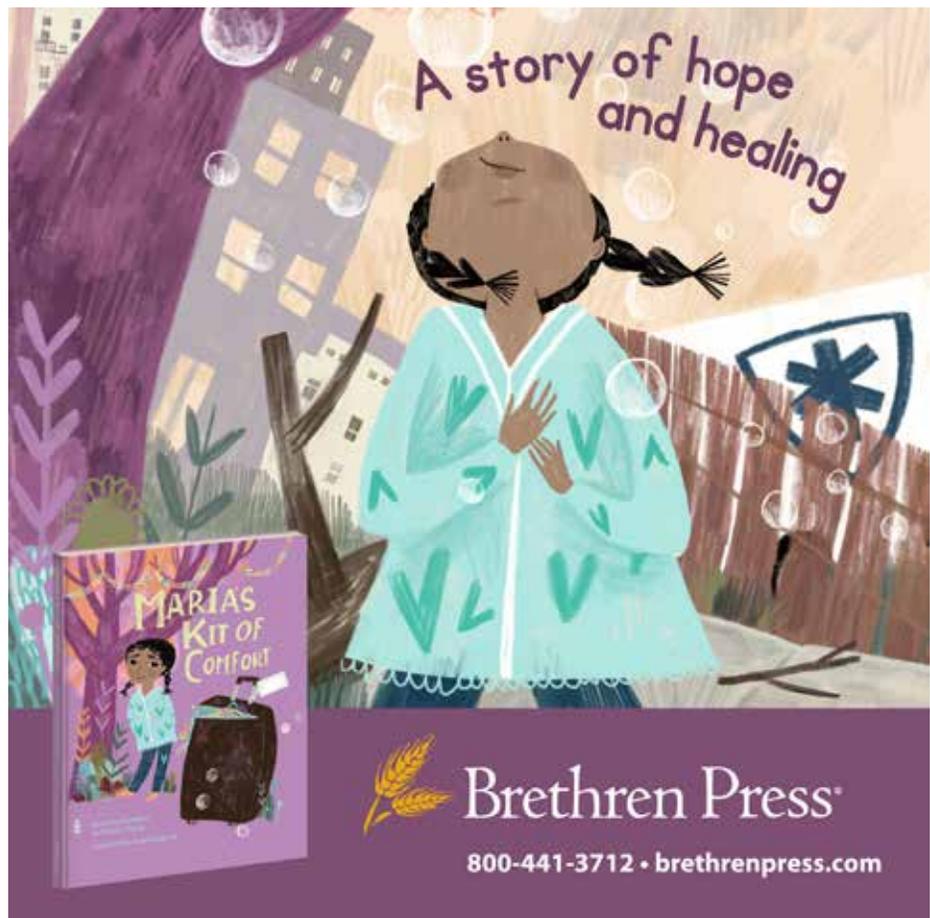
Doug Diamond
Eden, N.C.

The engine is mission

In September's reporting on National Youth Conference, the scripture quote from Luke 24:5b stirred up a question for me. "Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here, but raised up." Is it possible for a church to become like a cemetery?

I once shared this observation with a church where I was a pastor: Our church is like a beautiful, comfortable bus. People come on board, they're glad to see one another, they embrace, they sing heartily, they love it when new people join them. But the bus isn't going anywhere. It lacks an engine.

The engine for a church is mis-



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“ The church might do well to consider how to make space for those God has called to serve in a prophetic manner. ”

sion. That church was not able to hold its young people and continued slowly to decline.

John Braun
Seattle, Wash.

Make space for prophets

I read with interest “Who’s Your Prophet?” by Wendy McFadden in the

October MESSENGER. It is easy to sing the praises of prophets in the abstract. It is much more challenging to make space for the work of a flesh-and-blood prophet in our midst, sufficient to keep a roof over the prophet’s head and bread in their mouths, as Elijah discovered to his sorrow.

How many folk with prophetic gifts have served only a short time in paid

positions in our denomination or congregations because too many people found them a little too fearless, adaptable, and innovative for their tastes? How many nominees with prophetic gifts are excluded from the Annual Conference ballot each year, in the search for more broadly palatable candidates?

Those concerned about the diminution of strength and numbers in the



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church might do well to consider how to make space for those God has called to serve in a prophetic manner.

Bobbi Dykema
Springfield, Ill.

Share the gospel

From boyhood I have read the book of Revelation with wonder as I puzzled

over the symbolism and prophetic truth being conveyed. As the book comes to a close in chapter 22, it is identified as a message from Jesus followed by a warning about adding to or taking away from the things recorded in it.

While the gates of the city are open, verses 14 and 15 of chapter 22 indicate that some will have the right

to enter through the gates to the city and others will be excluded. This should motivate the church in the mission to share the gospel message with a needy world and invite individuals to the blessedness found in salvation through Jesus Christ and obedience to his commands.

Walter Heisey
Newmanstown, Pa.

TURNINGPOINTS

Centenarians

Ledford, Henry, 103, Flat Creek, Ky., Sept. 22

New members

Beacon Heights, Fort Wayne, Ind.: Alex Harding, Destiny Harding

Beaver Creek, Hagerstown, Md.: Kayleigh Chapman, Micah Chapman, Zofia Lane

Eel River, Silver Lake, Ind.: Karen Odiorne, June Stealy

Lafayette, Ind.: Colin Frier, John MacOwan, Sue MacOwan

Mount Vernon, Waynesboro, Va.: Jane Desper, Melissa Gray, Linda Harris, Sean Kneisley, Kay Merrill, Wayne Merrill

Pine Creek, North Liberty, Ind.: Diana Davis, Tim Davis, Katey Ringer, Matt Ringer, Rebecca Woodworth

Reading, Homeworth, Ohio: Jeanne Feaster, Chuck Jacobs, Jackie Jacobs

Waynesboro, Pa.: Jacksen Baker, Alex Cabrera

Wedding anniversaries

Chrisman, Ken and Vickie, Elkhart, Ind., 55

Eller, Jerry and Janice, Merritt Island, Fla., 50

Geiger, Clay and Sandra,

Columbia City, Ind., 50
Helsel, Merle and Janelle, New Enterprise, Pa., 50

Reeder, George and Faye, Hershey, Pa., 60

Spitler, Dale and Esther, Pleasant Hill, Ohio, 73

Zook, Ken and Marlene, Harrisburg, Pa., 55

Deaths

Barry, Richard Wesley, Jr., 73, Richmond, Va., Aug. 2

Bartelt, John A., 89, Polo, Ill., Sept. 13

Bashore, Alvin Z., 95, Palmyra, Pa., Sept. 29

Bonson, Donna Jean Stimely, 80, Milroy, Pa., Feb. 22

Breeden, Faye Y. Baer, 84, York, Pa., Sept. 2

Coffman, Flora Catherine Gochenour, 105, Maurertown, Va., July 21

Creager, Max E., 89, Chambersburg, Pa., Oct. 11

Deoleo, Ruben D., 62, Lancaster, Pa., Oct. 5

Easterday, Ted A., 83, South Whitley, Ind., Aug. 14

Ebersole, Beulah, 95, Palmyra, Pa., Oct. 13

Faus, Glen M., 86, Manheim, Pa., Oct. 4

Harshbarger, Evelyn A. Espigh, 102, Lewistown, Pa., April 5

Hawkins, Eleanor J. Neff, 88, Valparaiso, Ind., Oct. 11

Heitzman, Donald L., 87, Mishawaka, Ind., Sept. 12

Hoover, Kathryn Miriam Coppock, 104, McPherson, Kan., Sept. 16

Hull, Mildred M. Ness, 97, New Oxford, Pa., Oct. 20

Huse, Horace Elmer, 94, Toledo, Ohio, Oct. 14

Jarrett, Jessie Juanita Winter, 98, New Enterprise, Pa., Oct. 6

Kindig, Betty Lee Yowell, 93, Waynesboro, Va., July 30

Leddy, Peter J., Sr., 81, Apopka, Fla., July 6

Mummert, John Ronald, 80, Walkerton, Ind., June 28

Ruiz, Joaquin Loyo, 67, Donna, Texas, July 18

Schurr, Joellen Rae Metzler, 92, Ellisville, Mo., April 14

Shisler, Kent A., 64, Hatfield, Pa., Oct. 16

Shores, Diane Linda Johnson, 74, Easton, Md., Sept. 21

Shue, Marjorie L. Smith, 85, York, Pa., Sept. 14

Simon, Vi Barber, 86, North Newton, Kan., Oct. 9

Stump, Paul, 100, North Liberty, Ind., March 7

Turner, Jennie M. Smith, 89, New Enterprise, Pa., Sept. 14

Wessner, Robin A. Luckenbill, 67, Schuylkill Haven, Pa., Sept. 7

Ziegler, Marie Anna Wilhelm, 94, Rehlersburg, Pa., Oct. 3

Ordained

Brackett, Samuel, Pac. N. W. Dist. (Springfield, Ore.), Sept. 25

Cesar, Carrie, Pac. S. W. Dist. (San Diego, Calif.), Oct. 2

Stewart, W. David, Shen. Dist. (Forest Chapel, Crimora, Va.), Sept. 25

Licensed

Green, Allan, Mid-Atl. Dist. (Allensville, Martinsburg, W.Va.), Oct. 2

Kuecker, Betsy, N. Plains Dist. (Ivester, Grundy Center, Iowa), Sept. 4

Martin, Kimberly, Virgina Dist. (Hollins Road, Roanoke, Va.), Aug. 14

Shaulis, Travis, W. Pa. Dist. (Meyersdale, Pa.), July 17

Placements

Brumbaugh, Alan, from pastor, Petersburg Memorial, W.Va., to pastor, Fairview and Williamsburg churches, Williamsburg, Pa., Aug. 1

Cesar, Carrie, pastor, San Diego, Calif., Oct. 1

Emmons, Anthony, pastor, Bethlehem, Boones Mill, Va., Aug. 1

Green, Allan, pastor, Allensville, Martinsburg, W.Va., Oct. 2

Leister, Jeannine, from interim pastor to pastor, Maitland, Lewistown, Pa., Aug. 1

Puffenbarger, Kathy, pastor, Garbers, Harrisonburg, Va., Sept. 1

Reinford, Christopher, from associate pastor, Akron, Pa., to minister of youth, Ephrata, Pa., Aug. 31

Ronk, Patricia, associate pastor, Bethany, Boones Mill, Va., Aug. 15

Woodard, Emma Jean, from interim pastor to pastor, Bethany, Boones Mill, Va., Aug. 15

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What is worth keeping

Many of us feel shackled when pondering what to do with hundreds, even thousands, of photos and slides accumulated over decades. It takes only a few minutes of perusing old images for nostalgia to set in. More often than not, the pictures are unceremoniously returned to their filing



KEN FRANTZ

place/drawer/shoebox knowing that today just isn't the right day to sort memories and give them their due. Photos and slides represent a snapshot of our lives in the moment, and a cause for contemplation, if there ever was.

The Portuguese have a word for that sense of melancholy or longing that comes upon us in uncertain moments: *saudade* (so-dah-che).

Although there is no direct translation into English, one favored definition that continues to inspire is “the love that remains when something has gone.” It can be emptying or fulfilling depending on how it is approached. Looking back, I am certain that much love remains from the patience of my father in teaching me to use a camera, something that inspires still.

Some of the slides I personally struggle with letting go of include the first few ever taken by me on an old Argus 35 mm camera. The manual settings taught me about shutter speed, aperture, depth of field, and how to frame a shot without the digital editing we take for granted today—on our phones, no less.

The images were taken as the result of a picnic outing at the city zoo. The week-long wait for the developed slides to be returned to our local drug store was almost more than a 7-year-old could endure. The yellow Kodak

sliding box within a box had just become a gateway to the world, or at least to wonders close at hand.

How, then, to decide what is worth keeping? Obviously, duplicate slides and those with little family value, or just plain awful ones, are the first to go. Scenics, landscapes, and flowers follow in short order. One can have only so many shots of Mount Rushmore or other monuments. They're not going anywhere soon.

Some are of historical value over time, such as a series of pictures when Lake Meade's storage basin was at full capacity. Some photos might need to be visited and revisited before action is taken in their regard. It need not happen all at one sitting.

What is left is a distillation of images most valued. The process of discernment begins anew until what remain are the pictures worth scanning or placing on memory devices that consume minimal space and that can be affordably copied and digitally archives. Storing pictures on digital media has the advantage of also reducing paper waste in a world of finite resources.

What will be your strategy when decades of tradition and perceived importance of the church in general can no longer be set aside or stored away? What baggage has accompanied your faith journey? Are you willing to declutter by letting go of things that get in the way?

The pictures embedded in our hearts can be formidable. It's time to take a hard look at what Christianity has to offer and, in our most lucid moments of steadfast faith, be willing to resolve what is worth keeping and what is not. 

Ken Frantz is a non-salaried ordained minister serving Haxtun (Colo.) Church of the Brethren. This essay first appeared in the *South Platte Sentinel*, where he is a columnist.

“ Although there is no direct translation into English, one favored definition that continues to inspire is “the love that remains when something has gone.” ”



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Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand, and not just do what is most convenient for us.

Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?" That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out.

—Romans 15:1-3a (The Message)

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2022 FaithX Locations

Junior High

Completed 6th – 8th grade

- TBD Rodney, Michigan (Camp Brethren Heights)
- June 25-29 Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
- July 9-13 Burbank, Ohio (Camp Inspiration Hills)
- TBD Roanoke, Virginia

Junior & Senior High

Completed 6th grade – age 19

- July 30-August 4 Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Senior High

Completed 9th grade – age 19

- TBD Cle Elum, Washington (Camp Koinonia)
- June 18-24 Portland, Oregon
- TBD Washington, D.C.
- July 9-15 Knoxville, Tennessee
- July 16-22 Palmyra, Pennsylvania

Adult

Ages 18+

- Late May/Early June Spain

We Are Able

Ages 16-30

- TBD Elgin, Illinois

FaithX locations are subject to change.