

# MESSENGER

OCTOBER 2020 WWW.BRETHREN.ORG

## Truth-telling in Nigeria

Displaced people share their stories of Boko Haram



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CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# MESSENGER

October 2020 Vol.169 No. 8 [www.brethren.org/messenger](http://www.brethren.org/messenger)

Publisher: Wendy McFadden Associate editor: Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford  
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# Voice

**A**n editor always bears a responsibility to the writer. Whatever the degree of editing, the task is to preserve the writer’s voice. Editors hope the creator feels that the changes, whether major or minor, improve the clarity with which the voice can be heard.

Never have I felt that responsibility more keenly than when editing *We Bear It in*



WENDY MCFADDEN  
PUBLISHER

*Tears: Stories from Nigeria*, which is excerpted in this issue. If the interview was long, was I editing out just the right parts so that the voice could be heard more clearly? How much local dialect should be retained? What is the right punctuation to indicate that the voice trailed off into weeping and was unable to continue?

This collection of stories expresses dignity, pain, gratitude, sorrow, hope. I don’t know whether, under these circumstances, I would have the fortitude to say, “We bear it with tears” or “By God’s grace I am still alive.” What I do know is that publishing this book feels like a holy task.

In a time when every day seems to bring more overwhelming news, we need to be able to hear each other. The forces around us are big and unmanageable; in the midst of that we need to clear space for that one person’s story. Our human nature seems wired to comprehend the large picture by focusing most on the particular.

Right now there are so many ways that we need to be healed and repaired—within the church and beyond, in the country we live in and around the world. Perhaps each of us can be midwives for each other—asking the questions that help others find their voice, giving our attention to truly hear what others are saying—and bringing our stories to birth.

Whatever our plight, we can say with the psalmist:

“I love the Lord, because he has heard  
my voice and my supplications.  
Because he inclined his ear to me,  
therefore I will call on him as long as I live” (Psalm 116:1-2).

## HOW TO REACH US

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### Subscription rates:

- \$17.50 individual rate
- \$32 for 2 years
- \$14.50 gift rate
- \$14.50 church club rate
- \$27 for 2 years
- \$ 1.25 student (per month)

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MESSENGER is the official publication of the Church of the Brethren. Member of the Associated Church Press. Biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version. Copyright © October 2020, Church of the Brethren.

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)

**“Do this in remembrance  
of me.” —1 Corinthians 11:24b**

## World Communion Sunday

**W**orld Communion Sunday traces its origins to the 1930s in the Presbyterian Church. The very first observance reportedly occurred at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh in 1933, led by pastor Hugh Thompson Kerr—who had earlier been moderator of the Presbyterians’ General Assembly and wanted to encourage deeper Christian unity. By 1936, the idea had been embraced denomination-wide.

In 1940, it was adopted by the Federal Council of Churches—predecessor of today’s National Council of Churches of Christ—and grew into an international celebration.

Kerr’s son, Donald, later described the observance’s beginnings to Presbyterian historian John A. Dalles for *Presbyterian Outlook*: “The concept spread very slowly at the start,” Donald Kerr said. “People did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World

War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

In the Church of the Brethren, it is one of two times during the calendar year when most congregations celebrate the love feast (the other being during Holy Week, usually on Maundy Thursday). Observed annually on the first Sunday of October, this year it falls on Oct. 4.

In a historical article reflecting on the occasion, Ian Heston Doescher writes: “At its best, therefore, World Communion Sunday serves two purposes: It is both a joyous and meaningful partaking in Jesus’ sacred meal with his friends and a mind-opening exposure to different Christian traditions from around the world.”



Sources: “World Communion Sunday: Why We Do It and How,” Ian Heston Doescher, *MinistryMatters.com*; *PresbyterianMission.org* (Presbyterian Church U.S.A.); John A. Dalles, *Presbyterian Outlook*.

**“I want all of the holiness of the Eucharist to spill out beyond church walls, out of the hands of priests and into the regular streets and sidewalks, into the hands of regular, grubby people like you and me, onto our tables, in our kitchens and dining rooms and backyards.” —Shauna Niequist, *Bread and Wine: A Love Letter to Life Around the Table with Recipes***

### THE TABLE WITH NO EDGES

by Andrew King

We will sit down where feet tire  
from the journey.

We will sit down where grief  
bends the back.

We will sit down under roofs  
wrecked by artillery.

We will sit down where cries  
sound from cracked walls.

We will sit down where heat  
beats like hammers.

We will sit down where flesh  
shivers in cold.

We will sit down where bread  
bakes on thin charcoal.

We will sit down where there is  
no grain in baked fields.

We will sit down with those  
who dwell in ashes.

We will sit down in shadow and  
in light.

We will sit down, making  
friends out of strangers.

We will sit down, our cup filled  
with new wine.

We will sit down and let love  
flow like language.

We will sit down where speech  
needs no words.

We will sit together at the table  
with no edges.

We will sit to share one loaf, in  
Christ’s name, in one world.

*Andrew King is author of the weblog, “A Poetic Kind of Place.” This poem was written in 2015.*

# Giving voice to peace, love, justice

**T**he men, women, and children at Brooklyn (N.Y.) First Church of the Brethren speak with a wide variety of voices based in their identities as people of color, during the twin pandemics of coronavirus and racism.

Brooklyn First is home, since its 1899 founding, to immigrants from many lands. New arrivals, elders, and dual-language speaking second and third generations blend easily together in their love for each other and love of God. It is an



urban church where one hears dozens of languages including Chinese, Spanish, French, and English. The church founders were white farmers from rural Pennsylvania. The founders and the immigrants have been and are still being transformed by unique dynamics and interrelationships.

The church's first Zoom meeting was called "Struggling in the Midst of COVID-19 and Racism Pandemic" (Isaiah 56:7). From that first meeting came "Worship for Change: A Concert by Brooklyn First SonShine Praise Team" on Facebook in honor of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter. The Brooklyn First SonShine Praise Team gave voice to peace, love, and justice through Christ.

Out of a conversation on police reform came these priorities: Brooklyn First members want the police held accountable for their actions. They want better training for all police and those with disciplinary and mental health issues cared for and relieved from duty. They feel that they should be able to call on the police in a time of crisis and not be fearful that they will become a victim. —Doris Abdullah

# Hot meals for the community

**I**n March, Sebring (Fla.) Church of the Brethren asked what it could do to assist the community during the pandemic. The church is in Highlands County, one of the poorest in the state. It had offered a food pantry once a week, but that was no longer enough. After much prayer and discussion, it was decided to provide a free hot meal once a week.

The church provided start-up funding, volunteers, kitchen space, and the utilities, blessed with donations to assist with those expenses. Volunteers help with food preparation, social media and print media advertising, meal distribution, and clean-up. The main group of volunteers averages 20 to 25 hours each week.

The ministry started April 1 with a goal of serving 100 meals a week. During the first week, 71 meals were served. As word got out the numbers increased weekly, so much so that it was not clear the ministry could continue without assistance. The church decided to apply for and received

a COVID-19 grant through Brethren Disaster Ministries. Recently, meals are served to an average of 175 people per week, with a high of 220 meals one night. As of Sept. 7, the church has served in excess of 3,200 meals.

Judy Braun, one of the volunteers, suggested inviting the Palms Estates and Lorida Church of the Brethren to assist. The invitation resulted in an enthusiastic partnership that includes delivery service of meals to elderly members of the Palms Estates retirement park.

"It has been a great blessing for Lorida Church of the Brethren to be asked to assist in the Wednesday night feeding program at Sebring Church of the Brethren," said Jeff Parson, Palms Estates park manager. "We have had the opportunity on three occasions to prepare and serve the meals at Sebring and have assisted in delivering other weeks. The weeks that we had full charge over the meals we had 12 and 14 church members come out to help. The fellow-

ship among the believers was wonderful as we even sang and laughed as we worked together to feed His sheep."

In mid-September, the church received word it will receive \$25,000 from the county Cares Act funds to carry the program forward. —Terry Smalley



## Audrey's Outreach in the pandemic

### Brook Park (Ohio) Community Church of the Brethren

serves surrounding communities with food and clothing through Audrey's Outreach. The need in the area is great and the ministry has spilled over—literally and figuratively. After using every available square inch of the church building, a vacant apartment in a retirement center was converted into additional storage and a free-standing walk-in freezer/cooler was installed. Additional volunteers from other churches and the community now work alongside church members.

Volunteers drive to stores, bakeries, and restaurants each week to pick up donations. Others unload trucks, sort and weigh donations, and prepare for the open pantry sessions held twice a week. On Mondays and Thursdays, individuals and families in need can access an ample supply of groceries for their entire households.

Audrey's Outreach is a free-choice pantry where, under normal circumstances, clients would enter the facility to choose foods that they and their family will eat. COVID-19 prompted con-

version of the indoor operation into something safer for volunteers and clients alike. Volunteers created a drive-through pantry in the church parking lot, where they ask clients about food preferences and select accordingly to pack food boxes. Precautions are being taken: volunteers wear masks, face shields, and gloves.

During the pandemic, Audrey's Outreach continued to expand and has been using almost every room in the church to store food and clothes for the ministry. Even the sanctuary has been a temporary stockroom. During normal times, Audrey's Outreach served 125 to 140 families per week. Recently, the pantry has served 165 to 180 families per week. As of August it has distributed food to 725 families, representing 2,900 individuals—an average of 55,000 pounds of food each month. Also, through the summer, a sack lunch program reached the families of 128 children.

With the expiration of the stimulus package, rising unemployment, and evictions looming, demand is expected to continue to increase. —Samuel Ramser and Dot Samsi



## Tickled pink by VBS success

"We were tickled pink," said Jamie Rhodes, director of Christian education and youth at Chambersburg (Pa.) Church of the Brethren. The congregation's first virtual vacation Bible school (VBS) was a smash hit, connecting with close to double the usual 50-some children. "To reach 94 kids, that's awesome," Rhodes said. "I'm hoping that this brought families together."

Because of the pandemic, the church decided to take its annual VBS online. She and the others in leadership—Nicholas Wingert, Ali Toms, and Kathie Nogle—used a published curriculum that included pre-recorded video elements, but also did their own videos for the five days of online sessions. Take-home bags were distributed with activities for children to do at home.

To publicize the VBS, they got the word out through information for church members, fliers and letters and phone calls to previous VBS attendees, a mailing to nearby churches, social media, fliers at food distribution sites, and reaching out to other organizations serving the community.

The results were amazing, Rhodes said. An average of 150 Facebook views of the VBS were logged each day, with more than 200 on some days. They distributed 94 take-home bags, most during a drive-through pick-up at the church, but with a good number mailed to families outside of the area in four different states. More than 60 percent of families receiving take-home bags were new to the church.

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.



# What kind of spirit?

by David R. Miller

**A**bout 20 years ago, Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore and his wife, Maria, adopted two boys from Russia. As they passed through an airport to bring the boys home, they met an American.

“Are they brothers?” she asked.

“Now they are,” they answered.

“But,” the woman persisted, “are they brothers?”

Slightly irritated, Moore answered: “They are now.”

“But you know what I mean,” the woman persisted: “Are they really brothers?”

“Now,” he replied, “they are really brothers.”

This story helps me understand what Paul is talking about when he writes: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Romans 8:14). That’s the only criterion that matters. Someone may ask: Are you really brothers? Are you really sisters? You know what I mean?

Paul would answer: *Now they are!* They are children in God’s family.

We often forget the power of this affirmation. The churches Paul ministered to were not large. They met in houses. Some of them were Jews who believed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Others were Gentiles who had no idea of what a messiah was until they heard of Jesus. Some of them were well-to-do businesspeople; some were household slaves; there were day laborers, artisans, immigrants, even a government official or two. Not many were related by blood. Loyalty to Jesus and the leading of the Spirit was everything.

I still hear people say, “Blood is thicker than water.” If we don’t say it, we think it. That’s not the gospel of Jesus. The revolutionary idea behind the gospel—and it is revolutionary—is that the waters of baptism are more powerful to create relationships than blood.

The thing that stands out to me about this is that we don’t choose our sisters and brothers. In that way, it’s like most families. Siblings are siblings. We are connected to one another through our parents. Same thing in the church of Jesus Christ:

siblings are siblings—we are related to one another through the Spirit of God.

So when Paul says, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption” (v. 14) and are able to call God Abba, Father, he’s leading us out of this picking and choosing mindset where we are afraid of some people and distrustful of some people, and he’s pointing us toward a new community that is the children of God. Paul sees a new world coming. It has not fully arrived, but do we see it? Are we at least looking for it?

We have not received a *spirit of slavery to fall back into fear*. Earlier Paul talks about how we were once “slaves of sin” (Romans 6:17). A slave doesn’t have many choices. We were liberated from slavery through Jesus and now we have become children of God. We don’t just “belong” to the family; we are full members of the family.

We have these two types of spirit—the spirit of slavery or the spirit of adoption. A spirit of fear or a spirit of faith. A spirit of separation, because that’s what





REALLY, THAT'S WHAT SEEING A NEW WORLD COMING IS ABOUT: RELEASING THAT SPIRIT OF SLAVERY TO SIN, SLAVERY TO FEAR, SLAVERY TO MYSELF AND MY GROUP, AND TRANSFERRING OVER TO THE GOSPEL'S VISION OF BELONGING TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

*The Sun* by Edvard Munch, 1911-1916

sin does—it divides us: from God and from one another; or a spirit of peace, because Christ is our peace—he has made of us a new humanity, tearing down the dividing wall that separates us (Ephesians 2).

Of course, it's clear when we say it. In day-to-day living, it is much harder to see. Paul never loses sight of this struggle. To be joint heirs with Jesus is also to suffer with him. And it is to be glorified with him. Paul says he “considers the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (v. 18). The new world is coming. We can sense it in our bodies, even if it has not fully come.

What does it mean for the church to live out of this spirit of adoption? We are not only joint heirs with Jesus for glory, but also we share in his suffering. When we share in his suffering, we will notice sisters and brothers we have not noticed before. The creation itself waits “with eager longing for the revealing of the children of

God” (Romans 8:19). It wants to be seen—by us. To be a child of God is not an honorific title. To be a son or daughter of God is to be like God, practicing the ways of God.

If Jesus redeems the world, then we share in the work, the suffering labor, of that redemption. That's why we look for the new world that's coming. Nobody works for nothing. We are leaning into that new world. When we have given up on what God is doing, then we turn to ourselves, we start buying guns and stockpiling ammunition. That's an entirely different kind of trust. And it is preparing for a different kind of suffering.

When I was five or six years old, I went to my Aunt Norma's Baptist church for vacation Bible school. I was one of the little kids, so I sat up on the first pew. It was crowded. I was taking in everything. And right there in front of me was the flag. I had never seen a flag in church before. I had gone to only one church my whole life and that church didn't have a flag. As


a child, I noticed it.

Symbols matter. Often the absence of a powerful symbol speaks as loudly as its presence. No one at my church would have said a bad word about the flag. The absence of the flag wasn't a sign of disrespect. But the unadorned plainness of these Brethren meeting-houses was an attempt to communicate that in this space we are seeking something higher. We are children of God here. We seek this highest loyalty and then we hope to carry that out of this room, out of this gathered body, and live it in the world.

For some time now, our country has been engaged in a discussion about public symbols. The monuments and memorials related to the aftermath of the Civil War are part of that.

I know that everyone has an opinion. I only ask that we remember our baptismal promises—that we are liberated by Jesus; that we have turned away from sin and seek to live according to the life of Jesus; that we are part of God's family now. These monuments, like all symbols, communicate a message.

For us, the question is: What's the message? Is it a source of pride? If so, what are we proud of? If the message to white people is different than it is to Black and brown people, then what does that mean? Is that right? If I were in the other group, can I imagine what that might mean for me?

Really, that's part of what seeing a new world coming is about: Releasing that spirit of slavery to sin, slavery to fear, slavery to myself and my group, and transferring over to the gospel's vision of belonging to the people of God—the children of God. 

David R. Miller is pastor of Montezuma Church of the Brethren, Dayton, Va.

A person's silhouette is shown from behind, looking out over a vast, hazy landscape. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a soft glow and long shadows. The person's hair is slightly illuminated by the light. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# Mixed feelings during a time of 'exile'

by Don Fitzkee

WE ALSO NEED TO REMEMBER THAT OTHERS HAVE DEALT WITH AND CONTINUE TO DEAL WITH CIRCUMSTANCES THAT ARE FAR WORSE. GOD CAN GET US THROUGH OUR “EXILE” IF WE PUT OUR TRUST IN HIM.

**A funny thing happened** when God’s people returned from exile a couple thousand years ago. When they dedicated the temple foundation, some celebrated and others wept. The different reactions depended a lot on which direction they were looking.

So, a little history—only about 400 years. It shouldn’t take long. When Solomon’s reign ended in 922 BCE, there was a fight for the throne that resulted in a divided kingdom. Around 722 the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Sennacherib of Assyria. Judah soldiered on for another century and a half, before finally falling to Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar around 586 BCE.

Judah’s leaders were killed, and most of the rest of the population was deported to Babylon, beginning a roughly 50-year period known as the Babylonian exile. The city walls and temple were systematically destroyed, the city burned. God’s people found themselves in a foreign land, feeling utterly abandoned by God, lacking the freedom and the facilities to worship God as they had done for centuries.

But as King George sings in the musical *Hamilton*, “Oceans rise, empires fall,” and eventually Babylon did fall to Persia, and King Cyrus issued an edict giving the Jews permission to go back home. After settling in, the returning exiles turned their attention to the temple. They first built the altar so that they could offer sacrifices to God. With worship reestablished, they began work on the temple itself and, when the foundation was laid, they gathered for a great celebration. But that’s where things became interesting. Ezra 3:12-13 says:

*But many of the priests and Levites*

*and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping.*

As we find ourselves in the midst of a viral “exile” of our own, what can we learn from this curious story of mixed emotions?

### WE NEED TO KEEP THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE.

First, we need to keep our hardships in perspective. We are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that at this writing has claimed more than 850,000 lives around the world, with every indication that that number will continue to rise for months to come.

As of this writing, US deaths now exceed 185,000, which is more than the four largest cities in my part of Pennsylvania combined—Lancaster, Harrisburg, York, and Lebanon. Many additional thousands have been seriously ill, and it appears that some may suffer lifelong consequences.

Beyond the deaths, the individual hardships that some face also are far from trivial. Some have lost loved ones during this time and were not able to properly grieve. Some continue to be separated from loved ones due to the virus. Important activities, milestones, and celebrations—graduations, proms, weddings, anniversaries, retirements, sports seasons, travel, study opportunities—have been missed or postponed. Some have seen income plummet, businesses close, and lives and livelihoods

are threatened by poverty.

Yet, as bad as things are, some people have had to deal with far worse:

■ Our “exile” is now in its seventh month. The Jewish exile in Babylon went into its fifth decade.

■ It looks like we may have to deal with a couple years of hardship. Some refugees have spent a couple of decades living in the squalor of refugee camps and continue to do so with little hope for the future.

■ We face some risk of contracting a fatal virus when we interact with other people, but not like the risks people face where wars rage on.

■ We bemoan our temporary loss of freedom to do as we please, while Christians and others in some parts of the world face serious political oppression every day of their lives.

■ We lament not being able to gather for worship in our church sanctuaries, but during the pandemic my congregation has taken the opportunity to spruce up the facility. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has burned dozens of church buildings to the ground.

The pandemic and its related hardships in the US are real. We need to continue to do all we can to prevent the spread of the virus and help those who are affected the most. But we also need to remember that others have dealt with and continue to deal with circumstances that are far worse. God can get us through our “exile” if we put our trust in him.

### IS THERE SOMETHING BETTER THAN NORMAL?

There are some wonderful Old Testament stories of faithfulness that took place during the exile, including

the stories of Daniel and his colleagues Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who faced and survived a lion's den and a fiery furnace, respectively, rather than betray their exclusive commitment to God. So in some respects, faithfulness for them meant stubbornly holding on to their beliefs.

But the exile also significantly changed the Jewish people and their faith. Things that they previously considered essential no longer were. They had to adapt to changing circumstances.

Jewish religious life revolved around the temple. God himself was thought to reside there. But the temple had been destroyed and they now lived hundreds of miles from where it once stood.

The Jews responded by creating synagogues as places of religious instruction and worship, an adaptation that has served them for thousands of years. And even when they did return to Jerusalem some years later and rebuilt the temple, their understanding had changed. While the temple continued as a place of wor-

ship, gone was the belief that God was present in the temple in ways that God was not generally present in the world. Time in exile shakes the foundations and causes us to rethink things.

I have been wondering how our exile experience ultimately will change us. I don't have a crystal ball, but I think some changes already are evident. Congregations are using technology more than ever before. I don't see that coming to an end the minute we can go "back to normal."

## Better than normal? A dialog

**One:** Hey, do you know how many Brethren it takes to change a light bulb?

**Two:** No, how many?

**One:** Change? What do you mean change!

**Two:** Oh, I get it. Change does come hard for some of us. By the way, do you have change for a dollar?

**One:** No, I'm sorry, I don't. Haven't you heard that there's a change shortage? Due to the pandemic, currency isn't circulating like it normally does, and as a result we're actually running short on coins. We're literally short-changed.

**Two:** I knew there for a while that toilet paper supplies had been wiped out and all the hand sanitizer had been cleaned off the shelves, but I hadn't heard about the change shortage. Well, it's good that there's less change, because it sure feels to me like everything is changing! And not for the better.

**One:** I know, right. We can't go anywhere, can't do anything. And when we do go out, we have to wear these annoying masks.

**Two:** I just want everything to get back to normal!

**One:** Yeah, me too. Although I wonder if there's something better than normal.

**Two:** What do you mean? There's nothing better than normal.

**One:** Well, I just mean that "normal" wasn't working for everybody. The normal we have grown accustomed to may fall far short of God's best. We may need to change, and the pandemic might help us to do that.

**Two:** God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. That's doesn't sound like a Deity who is in favor of change.

**One:** Well, yes, in many ways God is unchanging, but it seems to me that Christianity is all about change. We talk about being born again, dying to self, and becoming a new creation in Christ. The end goal, according to Revelation, is a new heaven and a new earth. That's all about change, isn't it?

**Two:** Well, maybe, but I'm not ready for a new earth yet. I just want the old one back. I want the old church back. I want to be able to visit people and go where I want and do what I want. I want to sing. Loud. And I want to eat a donut and drink coffee. How can no coffee and donuts at church be "of the Lord"?

**One:** I'm with you on all of those things! I feel a tremendous sense of loss right now too. I think we'll eventually get those things back. But I'm also looking for the new things that God may have in store for us as a church. How can we be changed for the better? How might the new normal be closer to the kingdom of God than the old?


**Two:** Well, you got me there.

**One:** I'm not sure either. But I'm pretty sure that if we only long for the old normal we are likely to miss the Spirit leading us toward the new.

**Two:** Well, maybe it is true what they say about life and change.

**One:** What's that?

**Two:** Sometimes life is like underwear.

Change is good. 

This dialog was created by Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren pastors Misty Wintsch and Don Fitzkee.

## IN THIS TIME WHEN CHURCH LIFE IS LESS FOCUSED ON GATHERING IN BUILDINGS TO HAVE MY NEEDS MET, MIGHT IT BE AN OPPORTUNITY TO TURN OUR GAZE OUTWARD?

When most everyone can gather for worship again, congregations will continue to offer an online worship service because they have found they can reach people that they couldn't reach before—including members who were not able to physically attend worship but now are more connected than they were before the pandemic.

And including people who we don't even know, like the young woman who wrote to my congregation from Ohio, saying that through our services she believed she had found the denominational home that she had been seeking. The number of YouTube views our congregation's online worship services have received indicate that our virtual "attendance" may significantly exceed our pre-pandemic in-person attendance.

We may even need to rethink the purpose of church itself. We often come to church with a consumer mentality, seeking to experience the music I want, the fellowship I want, the activities I want. In this time when church life is less focused on gathering in buildings to have my needs met, might it be an opportunity to turn our gaze outward?

Our youth group this summer started a modest Giveaway Garden on church property that shared produce and built connections with our community. Maybe the pandemic is helping us to see things that we should have been doing all along. Is it possible that our "exile" experience could change us for the better?

### WHICH DIRECTION ARE WE LOOKING?

In the Ezra story, some shouted for joy that the foundation of the new temple had been laid, while others wept aloud

because the size of the foundation indicated that the new temple would be nothing like the old. The difference between the two was the direction they were looking. Those who rejoiced were forward looking. Those who wept looked back.

In his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, longtime Harvard professor and pastor Peter J. Gomes advocated for a forward-looking church. The church, he said, too often looks backward. He talked about the tendency of some churches to embrace primitivism, which is the notion that today's church should seek to imitate as much as possible the early New Testament Christians. The idea is that because they lived closer to the time of Jesus those early "primitive Christians" were more faithful than all generations since then. Gomes doesn't buy it.

His critique of primitivism caught my attention because this desire to reclaim the faith and practices of the early church was a central tenet of the early Brethren. They believed faithfulness meant looking backward and reclaiming what had been lost. I have some sympathy for that view. It is tempting to look back on the good old days and think of all the ways today's church doesn't quite measure up. And there are some.

But while we can be inspired by past examples of faithfulness, we can't bring back yesterday's church. Gomes writes:

*At no point does Jesus make the past sacred. Never does he point to an age that was superior to the age that is or is to come, and yet so many of us take pride in our fidelity to the age that is past. . . . Jesus never appealed to some past theological consensus; he claimed*


*the future for God, and for those people of God who were prepared to regard the future as the place where God would perform his transforming wonders.*

In a recent column titled "Life Among the Ruin," Timothy Dalrymple, the president and CEO of *Christianity Today*, tied the story in Ezra 3 to current events. He began with a quote from a Richard Powers novel: "Trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent and growth is invisible." His point was that it is easy to see all that is being lost during this pandemic, but we might be missing new things that are coming to life.

"What temple are we building amid the wreckage today?" Dalrymple asks. "We rightly mourn the suffering and the loss of life. Magnificent trees are crashing to earth. But when we look back 30 years from now, what new things will have been birthed in this moment?"

He concludes, "If the church remembers its first love, if it follows in the footsteps of Christ, then it will bring life out of this death."

Peter Gomes concluded his book on a similar hopeful note: "The future is God's, it is ours, it is good; and that is the good news."

And what about that second temple that seemed so puny that it brought some backward-looking believers to tears? Well, it would serve God's people for more than 500 years and under Herod would become one of the most magnificent buildings in the ancient world. 

Don Fitzkee is associate pastor of Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren.



Courtesy of East Dayton Fellowship

# A new dawn for East Dayton

*Before the pandemic, community members join in a free meal after Sunday worship.*

by Walt Wiltschek

**S**usan Liller spent a recent Sunday afternoon at the lake—fishing. That might not be noteworthy in itself until you noticed who she had along for the trip: a group of middle schoolers, many from a local homeless shelter. She expects it's the first time they have ever tried to fish.

Until this summer, in fact, when Liller led another regional expedition, most of them had never been to a lake before. On another night they took in a football game. It's all about building relationships, something Liller sees as critical in her ministry on the east side of Dayton, Ohio.

"These kids had a fun time, with lots of smiles," Liller said in a recent report to Southern Ohio/Kentucky District, "(It's) a break from their normal lives, a glimpse into a different part of God's kingdom here on earth."

That's par for the course these days at East Dayton Fellowship, a unique hybrid congregation that focuses on urban ministry, and where Liller now serves as associate pastor. One day might include a program for the youth. Another might feature a neighborhood block party. Each Wednesday evening an outdoor vespers service takes place. And on Sundays, free lunches are available to anyone who wants one. Prior to the pandemic it was a sit-down meal with free groceries to take home, but since the pandemic hit it's been to-go lunch bags.

While the small congregation is thriving now, it took some time to get to that point. East Dayton Church of the Brethren

had been in the community for many years, but it had dwindled to a handful of people attending on Sunday mornings.

"East Dayton Church of the Brethren had a history of being a very vibrant neighborhood church, but not as much in recent times," Liller explained. "They were able to survive only because they had an endowment to maintain the building."

Then about eight years ago a Brethren in Christ congregation in nearby Englewood decided to plant an urban ministry just down the street, led by recent seminary graduate Zach Spidel. East Dayton Church of the Brethren wasn't sure at first what to make of this newcomer springing up two doors down. But the plant, called The Shepherd's Table, began to take root—mostly working with children and youth. It outgrew its space in a small house and asked whether it could use the East Dayton parking lot or garage. The church agreed to use of the outdoor space.

"I felt it was a 'God thing,'" Spidel says of his call to that neighborhood. "I wanted to go to an area underserved by churches. I felt strongly about that, because Jesus went to the least and the lost. We saw God opening doors in this place to build relationships with people."

Over time, the relationship with the East Dayton church warmed as some complementary possibilities became apparent: a church of mostly older adults who could serve as mentors on one hand and a group of city kids who needed an adult presence in their lives on the other. Eventually, East Dayton found itself in need of a pastor, and they invit-

ed Spidel to serve the congregation. He agreed and obtained dual ordination in the Church of the Brethren.

“They saw what he was doing, trying to get the neighborhood involved,” Liller said. “They thought, ‘This is like what used to happen in this church many years ago, and we want that again.’”

Even so, urban ministry is sometimes chaotic, Spidel admits, smashing any multi-year strategic plans and requiring “a combination of patience and flexibility.” He was ready to throw in the towel on a few occasions as hurdles emerged, but friends and colleagues kept encouraging him. And he’s glad he stayed. “If you stand there and refuse to go away and keep your hands and heart open, astonishingly beautiful things can happen,” he says. “If I stay open, God brings these really cool opportunities.”

Meanwhile, Liller found God drawing her to new things, too. Trained as an accountant and later teaching at the university level, she began to feel a nudge toward a different sort of career, one that allowed her to “devote more time to family and church.”

That nudge became stronger when Irvin and Nancy Sollenberger Heishman arrived as pastors at West Charleston Church of the Brethren, Liller’s church north of Dayton. One day, they and Liller went out for lunch together at a local restaurant.

“Irv and I shared that we just wondered if we were hearing correctly a sense of restlessness within her that was leading perhaps to a call to ministry,” Nancy recalls. “She had been serving faithfully in significant ways on the local, district, and denominational levels, and it seemed like a change was in the works for her. Susan at that time seemed to confirm that we were hearing her correctly, and that a sense of call was indeed forming within her.”

That led her to Bethany Theological Seminary, on a “five-year plan” to complete a ministry degree as she was licensed and began working with a calling cohort. When it came time for a field placement, though, she wasn’t sure she was interested in traditional congregational ministry. She had had her fill of church meetings over the years, serving as district treasurer and on the denominational Mission and Ministry Board.

In the meantime, she had begun selling items online, often searching for bargains at a Goodwill outlet in Dayton where she encountered a variety of cultures and languages. That rekindled her love of the city, where she had spent her



Pat, a regular at East Dayton Fellowship, enjoys a lunch delivered by the church.

early years before her family moved to the suburbs.

“Over the years I had missed that,” Liller said. “Now I felt at home again. I began to feel the city was where I was being called.”

Nancy Sollenberger Heishman had heard about Spidel’s work with East Dayton and connected Liller with him, thinking it might be a good match. Liller made the call, set up a meeting, and the rest is history. They waited a year to start the official field placement since Spidel was just beginning a Ph.D. program, but Liller began attending the congregation, which at the time was doing a more traditional morning service and an evening one geared toward the Shepherd’s Table community while combining some outreach activities. The group included a range of those who were homeless, recovering addicts, the working poor, and a few middle-class members.

“I wanted to hang out with those folks!” Liller says.

Then the placement experience began, and by the time it was winding down in the spring of 2019, the congregation began talking about combining their worship, too. They started that on a trial basis in August, calling the merged group “East Dayton Fellowship,” and by this past March they called Liller as a quarter-time associate pastor, boosting her to half-time after she graduated from Bethany in May. Partners in both denominations are providing support.

And already, she and Spidel are seeing ministry blossom in their little corner of Dayton, even as COVID-19 has altered the landscape: the food ministry, the youth ministry, the weekly vespers, clean-up projects, and all sorts of connections with other community organizations. Most recently, for example, a food truck ministry asked to set up in their parking lot once a week just after another community partner had closed its doors due to the pandemic.

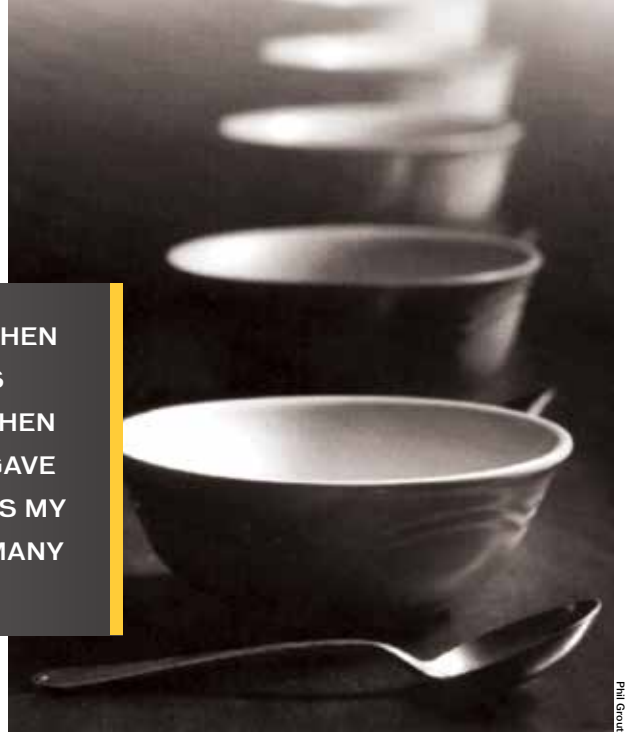
“It keeps changing. Whatever story we tell is what it is at that time,” Liller says. “We don’t have the skills and resources to do all these things, and so many good organizations are already in existence, so we work hard to connect with them and use their resources and create relationships.”

Sometimes in the parking lot, sometimes in worship, and sometimes out on the lake. 

*Members of East Dayton Church of the Brethren and The Shepherd’s Table merged their groups in 2019.*



“WHILE THEY WERE EATING, JESUS TOOK BREAD, AND WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS, HE BROKE IT AND GAVE IT TO HIS DISCIPLES, SAYING, “TAKE AND EAT; THIS IS MY BODY.” THEN HE TOOK A CUP, AND WHEN HE HAD GIVEN THANKS, HE GAVE IT TO THEM, SAYING, “DRINK FROM IT, ALL OF YOU. THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE COVENANT, WHICH IS Poured OUT FOR MANY FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.” —Matthew 26:26-29, NIV



Phil Groat

## A table long and wide

by Robyn Reals

*As her congregation meets by Zoom, Robyn Reals writes, “I miss my church and the hugs and shared times together.” She recalls this love feast that was special to her and thought it might help other readers remember their own meaningful moments of communion.*

**I have loved the Brethren love feast** tradition for many decades.

I was a preteen when I joined love feast in the pews at Philadelphia First Church of the Brethren. Women and girls, most in prayer coverings, sat on one side of the dimly lit sanctuary, and men and boys gathered on the other. There was a mystique, a solemn quietness, to the communion meal of plain and deliciously thick rectangles of unleavened bread sitting next to plates of soft warm chunks of cheese.

**World Communion Sunday** is celebrated on the first Sunday of October. This expression of community and unity is observed by many Christians around the world, including the Church of the Brethren.

Admittedly, this prelude to footwashing was a little trying for a talkative preteenager. We were permitted to commune with each other, but in short whispers. Quiet music played in the background. The story of the last supper was read from the Bible. We shared communion at our pews, and then went downstairs to the fellowship hall for footwashing.

Year after year, I thought: This cannot get any better, and must be putting a smile on God’s face.

I’ve always been drawn to outsized and very aged things—impossibly towering buildings, enormous construction equipment, frail antiques and old yellowed books, creaky dark and majestic tall mast ships. I find these absolutely entrancing.


Love feast gives me the same kind of feeling, with the added warmth of spirituality. Here I am, a “modern” woman, continuing a practice begun thousands of years ago. I touch history with my fingertips every time I take part in recreating love feast. It has been my good fortune to have participated with people very dear to me—people like me, people I know.

But memories of my favorite service

are of a table much longer and wider than usual. The cross-shaped table was draped in plain white linen and decorated simply with flickering, white votive candles. That table was filled with people I knew and people I had never seen before. We were a beautiful kaleidoscope of color, lifestyles, and nationalities.

My congregation shares occasional worship and service opportunities with other local churches and groups. Our times together infuse our church communities with palpable vitality and new ways to practice our inclusive, welcoming ways.

At that love feast table, I was exhilarated to be amid a sea of faces different and familiar—listening to the story of the last supper through beautiful poems and thoughts from people I had not yet met, sharing a meal, and washing the feet of Brethren and non-Brethren followers of Jesus. It was fun, it was solemn, it was just as Jesus would have loved.

I thought: This cannot get any better, and must be putting a smile on God’s face. 

Robyn Reals is a member of Arlington (Va.) Church of the Brethren.



# We bear it in tears



## ***We Bear It in Tears: Stories from Nigeria.***

Interviews by Carol Mason.  
Photographs by Donna Parcell.  
Published by Brethren Press,  
November 2020. Pre-order at  
[www.brethrenpress.com](http://www.brethrenpress.com),  
[brethrenpress@brethren.org](mailto:brethrenpress@brethren.org),  
or 800-441-3712.

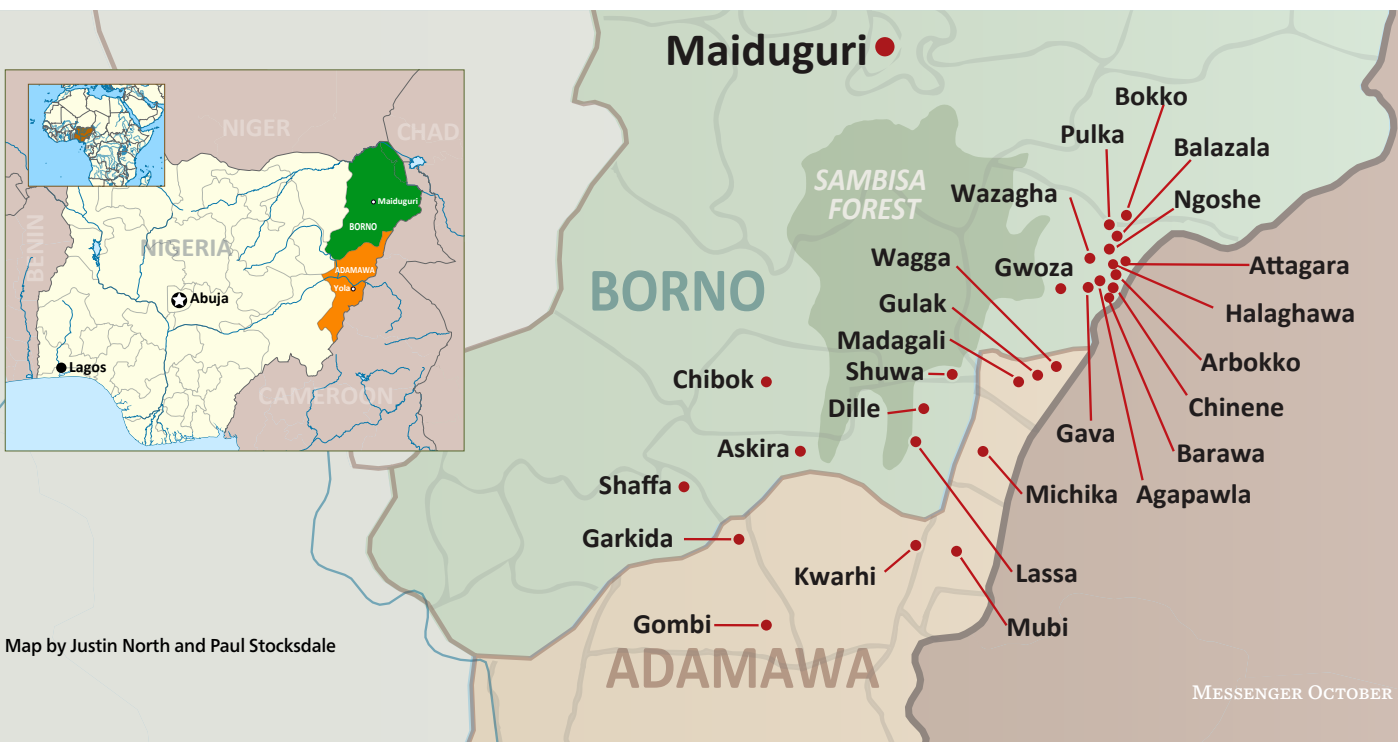
**N**ext month Brethren Press will publish a book about what it has been like for the church in Nigeria to suffer from Boko Haram. While the book is new, it has been years in the making.

It was Jay Wittmeyer who began thinking of such a book after witnessing the effects of the attacks. Then executive of Global Mission and Service, he oversaw the Church of the Brethren response to our sister church, Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (EYN—the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria). There were years of visits, repairs of churches and homes, delivery of food and supplies, trauma healing, and more. Brethren in the US opened their hearts wide and gave a phenomenal amount—more than \$5.4 million—through the Nigeria Crisis Response.

But in the midst of all these big activities, Wittmeyer was afraid the individual stories would get lost. He couldn’t shake the idea that the stories needed to be heard and written down. After proposing the publishing project to Brethren Press, he sent Carol Mason, interviewer, and Donna Parcell, photographer, to travel across northeastern Nigeria. About 260 survivors were interviewed. Most were Christian; some were Muslim. More than 60 of those stories are captured in the book, and the rest are preserved in the Brethren Historical Library and Archives.

The title of the book comes from one of the stories: “No one can bear it, but we are bearing it in tears,” said Sarana Hanatu John, from Michika. Those words seemed to represent both the agony and the fortitude of those who told their stories to Mason. These women, men, and children told of family members killed and babies born on the road, of livelihoods disrupted and education resumed, of deep despair and deeper trust in God.

The violence continues to this day. This book is not meant to convey the chronology of EYN’s ordeal, but rather to give readers insight into one period of time. You are invited to listen to this truth-telling. —Wendy McFadden



Map by Justin North and Paul Stocksdale



## Burying the dead

Rubecah Dauda

**T**hey (BH) asked me, “Are you the pagans?” We answered them, “No, you are the pagans.” They asked us, “Where are your properties?” We answered, “We don’t have any.” But they found the little little food items we had hidden. Then they killed one of my in-laws.

I heard they only allowed women to come back down to bury and only those that are Muslim. We covered our heads and carried the dead body into the house and buried it.

*Rubecah Dauda is from Wagga, Madagali.*

# Three months on the mountain

Liyutu Yakubu

**B**alazala is at the main road that they would follow. The BH [Boko Haram] would follow this road and kill so many people. I ran.

My husband had already left with our sons. If they see males they will kill them. I took little stones and attached them with little strings to their ears and dressed them so that they would look like little girl children so they wouldn't kill them.

I began to move from village to village. One had no people at all in it. I slept one night there just me alone. Then I climbed the mountain. There was no food. I saw there are people hiding there. I begged for food. They gave me some *gari* (cassava) and I mixed it with water for the children to eat something. It is the rainy season so I took *leder* (plastic bags) to make a headcovering for them to keep the water

out of their ears and eyes.

At first BH is killing those at the mountain, especially those who cannot climb. Those able to climb have already done so, but BH is killing those who could not climb the mountain. I am one of those unable to climb, but by God's grace I am here. I spent three months on that mountain.

I was looking for a way to escape, but there is no way that I know. That man said, "Come let me show you a way." I followed that way and I made it to Gwoza. From there I came back to the main town of Gwoza. BH was there. I ran to Pambula. BH still followed. I ran to Mubi near Kwarhi. BH followed.

*Liyutu Yakubu is from Balazala, Gwoza.*





## Born under the rain

### Blessing Bello

**I**n 2014, BH attacked nearby Gori killing twenty-five people, and when we heard this news we ran to the bush. We spent about three months there in the mountains, hearing them come closer. After three months they attacked. We spent the whole night and day trekking to Cameroon. We spent two months in Cameroon.

My husband had already run away because they were killing and capturing all males. My husband knew Markus [Gamache, a staff member of EYN and

founder of the Gurku IDP camp], and he brought my husband here. Then they send money to Cameroon and I come to join them together with our children. So this is where we are.

It was the rainy season and I gave birth on the way under the rain. Since newborn baby is born under the rain, I know God has taken care of me.

*Blessing Bello is from Wagga, Madagali. Her husband, Bello Luka, is helping as a security man at the camp.*

# Able to escape

Francis B. Diffa

**W**hen the Boko Haram came, they started firing into the houses and mosques and churches all. We ran; they pursued us. They made some of us to enter into the BH, but some of us refused to enter. They refuse me, only God knows (why). It was a miracle I was one of the ones able to escape.

I went to another village, Mangara. I have two weeks there, and they came again and fired our houses with torch-

es. They killed some of us. Again I escaped. I spent two years in Maiduguri.

I am able to go to school in the town (of Gurku). On the 7th of this July in this year, I will write the Junior Secondary School WECK exam to enter the Senior Secondary School. May God help me to pass.

*Francis B. Diffa, age fifteen, is from Wafagha, Gwoza.*



Donna Percell



# Respect

by Lauren Seganos Cohen

*This year MESSENGER is focusing its Bible studies on 10 words that rose to the top during church-wide conversations toward a compelling vision. Watch for a new word each month.*

*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:*

*'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'*

—Matthew 15:1-9

**J**esus' conversations with scribes and Pharisees aren't nearly as well known as stories about his parables and miracles. Anyone who watches movies and TV can tell you scenes with a lot of action are more exciting than scenes with a lot of dialogue. But I find this particular conversation to be especially striking in today's world.

First, the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus to chastise him. Why? Because his disciples are not washing

their hands before they eat. To be honest, this seems like a reasonable complaint! Even in the pre-COVID-19 world, we taught our children to wash their hands before meals. Today, "Wash your hands for 20 seconds" is the new mantra.

In ancient Israel, though, handwashing was part of religious rituals tied to purity and cleanliness. New Testament scholar Douglas R. A. Hare writes that Israel's religion included many laws concerning ritual purity or

holiness, in line with the holiness code of Leviticus 19.

"There is no biblical law about washing hands before eating," Hare notes, "but there is a requirement that priests wash hands and feet before ministering at the altar" (Exodus 30:17-21). The Pharisees also took seriously the command of Exodus 19:6: "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." They argued all Israelites should consider themselves as holy as priests (an early rendition of the priesthood of all believers, perhaps?), and therefore all Jews should wash their hands before eating.

Handwashing was not just an act of good hygiene, but also a religious act and ritual.

But Jesus' response to the Pharisees here is not to advocate for folks to stop washing their hands or to suggest these rituals are unimportant. Rather, he's saying rituals *for the sake of* those rituals are null and void in the eyes of God. "Why do you break the commandments for the sake of your tradi-

## THIS YEAR CHRISTIANS, AND PEOPLE OF ALL FAITHS, REIMAGINED WHAT THEIR BELOVED TRADITIONS AND WORSHIP PRACTICES LOOK LIKE.

tion?” Jesus asks. In other words, why are you so keen on maintaining your rules and traditions at the expense of those around you?

Before the Pharisees (or we) can protest, Jesus gives another example from the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and mother” (Deuteronomy 5:16). Some of you, Jesus says, are telling your mother and father, either by your words or by your actions: “My love of God is greater than the love I have for you. My obligation to God is greater than my obligation to care for you. My worship of God is greater than my respect for you.” In this way, Jesus argues, you think you are following the commandments of God, but you are actually breaking them. “For the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.”

Jesus is teaching them, and us, that when traditions, practices, and acts of worship do not honor and respect those around us, God rejects those acts. Our religious traditions amount to nothing—are literally made void—when we prioritize them over honoring and respecting and loving those around us.

Loving God through our acts of worship and piety is never more important than showing love and respect to others, because loving our neighbors is also how we love God.

Presbyterian minister Amy Howe tells this story: “One Sunday morning I came into my office to find a note quickly scribbled and left on my desk. The author of the note wrote something like, ‘It seems that our youth don’t know how to spell any better than they know the Bible.’ I walked to my doorway where I had a good view of the newly created bulletin board that welcomed kids and adults to the Sunday school wing of the church. In bright,

happy colors it invited one and all to attend ‘Sunday Skool!’ I chuckled as I realized that their intent was to get people’s attention . . . and it had worked. I may have been mildly amused, but I was also angry. I knew the young people who had created the bulletin board had sacrificed part of their Saturday so we could feel welcomed to a new season of Sunday school. The person who had left the note on my desk was missing the deeper Christian message.”

Instead of celebrating the message that honored and welcomed people, the note-writer was more concerned with proper spelling. In what ways do we care more about proper displays of worship and traditions than we care about respecting and loving people in their walk with Jesus?

How might the words of Jesus speak to us during a global pandemic? Surprisingly well. This year Christians, and people of all faiths, reimagined what their beloved traditions and worship practices look like when it is not safe to engage in the usual ways of being the church: sitting close to one another in our sanctuaries, sharing meals together, singing in worship, and passing the peace of Christ. In addition to the tragic loss of life and livelihoods this pandemic has caused, a blow has been dealt to these traditions.


But these words from Jesus, as harsh as they may seem, give us deep truths to ponder today. During this pandemic, how have we been clinging to conventional worship and traditions in ways that actually bring harm to the most vulnerable among us? Are we, like the Pharisees, more concerned with following our obligation to familiar worship over our obligation to

honor, respect, and care for those around us? If Jesus were standing in front of us today, would he look at the actions of his church and cry out, “For the sake of your tradition you make void the word of God”?

Since it has become clear that wearing face masks is a simple and effective way of helping to slow the spread of the virus, Brethren Press has created face masks that you can purchase. Embroidered on each are well-known Brethren statements and values: “Speak Peace” proclaims one. “Peacefully. Simply. Not So Close Together” states another. But my favorite is this: “For the glory of God and my neighbor’s good.”

This statement, which was displayed over the printing press of Brethren forefather Christopher Sauer, describes the life of discipleship for which Brethren strive: We seek to glorify God our creator while simultaneously working for the wellbeing of our neighbors. What a perfect message to display on a face mask, the purpose of which is to show loving care and respect to those around us!

Beyond the pandemic, we would do well to examine our own values around worship, traditions, and rituals and how those values do or do not show respect and honor to those around us. To do otherwise is, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, to honor God with our lips while keeping our hearts far from him.

“For the glory of God and my neighbor’s good.” Pandemic or otherwise, I have a feeling that Jesus would approve. 

Lauren Seganos Cohen is pastor of Pomona (Calif.) Fellowship Church of the Brethren and a member of the Church of the Brethren Mission and Ministry Board. She is a graduate of Andover Newton Theological School.

# God still made a way

## Ministry Summer Service during COVID-19

*Two interns who took part in Ministry Summer Service (MSS) this year share their reflections on the experience—certainly one of the most unusual since the start of the program. MSS is a leadership development program for college students in the Church of the Brethren, sponsored by the Youth and Young Adult Ministry and the Office of Ministry, with those offices and four of the church-related colleges and universities providing scholarships. Usually, interns would spend 10 weeks working alongside a mentor in a congregation, district office, camp, or denominational*

*Sierra Dixon, Harrisburg, Pa.*



*program, following an in-person orientation. The pandemic forced the program to shift how interns were placed, how they served, and even how orientation happened.*

**I** was looking forward to being in a different area and location for church, but God still made a way for this program to happen, so I am very thankful.

When I got the call that things were shifted to online, I wasn't sure how to react at first. As I learned what the online format would be like, I could

sense God telling me, "Sierra, do it! This is an opportunity that you NEED to take." So that's exactly what I did.

Between the Zoom calls, devotions, and guest speakers, I can definitely say that I have learned so much about ministry. Our orientation speakers talked about spiritual practices, worship and preaching, theology, Brethren heritage, working styles, and ethics.

I volunteered at my home church, Harrisburg First Church of the Brethren [in Pennsylvania]. I helped out with the food distribution on Friday mornings, and I helped with the church's social media pages. Through the pandemic my church has still been able to help the community as much as it can, and I am thankful that I am able to help out as much as I can.

On Fridays, before the truck of food gets there, volunteers from all over are putting cardboard boxes together and stacking them. When the food gets there, we are able to pack the boxes for the people receiving their packages. The packages have dry foods, canned goods, produce, meat, dairy, etc.

Once all the pallets are set, all of the volunteers assemble in a line ready for directions. The woman or man in charge for the day tells each volunteer what to put into the boxes—for example, the quantity of each product on the pallets, such as two bags of carrots and one egg carton. There are two different lines, one for dry foods and one for cold foods.

Once the packages are filled they are placed on pallets and ready to pick up. The first couple dozen packages typically go to individuals who are delivering to other families, so for the



first half hour we pack people's cars with packages so that they can get out of the way for the rest of the packages we need to make. —**Sierra Dixon**

**I**n the early spring, I was debating what to do for the summer before my junior year of college. The head of the chemistry department had encouraged me to apply to an amazing research opportunity in France. I also had been feeling a tug toward ministry, but I was so unsure of what that would mean for me, a pre-med student. My pastor encouraged me to consider Ministry Summer Service, but I was unsure if that was something I should do. It would be hard to pass up doing research abroad if it came time to choose, but I decided to apply anyway and see where God would lead me.

The day before I heard back about the research opportunity, a feeling of peace washed over me as I thought about doing MSS and resolved to turn down the research offer if I was accepted. Turns out I didn't get the research position, and I wouldn't have been able to go abroad anyway due to the pandemic, so it was just as well—funny how the Spirit works sometimes.

MSS shifted to a virtual format, which in many ways was a blessing in disguise. Our weekly Zoom calls were fascinating sessions, including subjects like theology, work styles, and



*Kaylee Deardorff, Durham, N.C.*

worship/preaching, with some additional sessions by people we would not ordinarily have heard from if we were in-person.

Our diverse group of interns made for especially engaging conversations, and when we collectively decided we needed to have an additional conversation set aside for race and the church, we did so. It was perhaps the most memorable of the calls for me. That conversation emphasized the importance of engaging in conversations with our siblings in Christ, even when the subject is uncomfortable or challenging. Additionally, we discussed the church as a whole and the need to empower members of marginalized groups through the unconditional love and compassion we're called to share. It's that conversation and ongoing reflection that brings up new thoughts and actions that continue to encourage personal and collective growth.

Of course, I missed getting an in-person placement, but I'm grateful that I got to be involved in my home congregation, Peace Covenant Church of the Brethren [in Durham, N.C.]. I worked with pastor Dana Cassell on outreach ideas, preached during online worship one Sunday, and worked on a project to create a digital collection of devotionals and online resources for the congregation.

Along with MSS, my summer included taking an online class, working with my campus ministry to plan for the fall semester, and working with patients in nursing homes and hospice facilities as a home care provider. It was this combined experience that made me realize that part-time ministry—a reality for so many—is possible for me too. And ministry can look like so many things, including preaching a sermon, leading a Bible study, and providing care for patients in their last days. I don't necessarily have to choose between a call to medicine or to ministry.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate in MSS and that the denomination provides such an experience to young adults for this kind of discernment. After this summer, irrespective of its unexpected twists and turns due to the pandemic, I realize that ministry will be a part of the life I live, no matter what, and I look forward to seeing where God continues to lead me. —**Kaylee Deardorff**

**IRRESPECTIVE OF ITS UNEXPECTED TWISTS AND TURNS DUE TO THE PANDEMIC, I REALIZE THAT MINISTRY WILL BE A PART OF THE LIFE I LIVE, NO MATTER WHAT.**



# Nourishing the community's spirit

by Frances Townsend

**T**he year 2020 will be remembered in some churches as the year of online worship, or the summer of outdoor worship. In other congregations it will be remembered as the year without the big chicken noodle dinner, or sauerkraut luncheon, or whatever is that church's annual extravaganza.

Marilla (Mich.) Church of the Brethren did chicken noodle dinners for many years, first as a hunter's supper held at the beginning of deer season. When the ladies got too old and too few to do all the work of feeding 150 people a full meal, chicken and homemade noodles were served at the Share the Harvest sale in September. In 2019, the chicken noodle dinner was part of the centennial celebration. It was so much a part of the church's identity for the neighbors, how could it be left out?


These food events can be a big part of a rural or village church's identity. The Congregational Church in Onekama, Mich., which makes and sells apple dumplings in a big October event, even uses [appledumpling-church](mailto:appledumpling-church) as an email address.

Big food events take a lot of hands in the kitchen, so are real community builders. Kids work alongside grandmothers, and folk who don't often come on Sunday mornings will lend a hand too. When the Marilla congregation spent Friday afternoon and evening making noodles for the last fall dinner, I helped roll out balls of dough and cut noodles. I remembered my mother telling me that when my grandmother made egg noodles, she would use the yolks for noodles and beat the extra whites for fluffy tapioca pudding.

My mother made the pudding but not the noodles. My grandmother made most of her noodles for her church's suppers and sales. Just like the children of the Marilla church helping that day last fall, I was standing in my ancestor's place with flour on my hands.

Something about participating in a group work bee like this—which has been going on for so many years—helps form our identity as a group and as individuals. It doesn't have to involve a traditional, antiquated process like making egg noodles or boiling apple butter. Youth groups have been doing spaghetti dinners to raise money for National Youth Conference for long enough that kids are now hearing those stories from their grandparents.

Whenever a congregation undertakes a project big enough to require all hands on deck pulling together, it is important for the community, whether or not it makes money. Bonding over a common goal, participating in the work, even laughing together when something goes wrong, are what is most important.

Thank God for projects so big we need to work together to accomplish them, and that we have a way for everybody to help and participate. During this COVID-19 induced hiatus in church activities, some traditions may fall by the wayside, but big food events—with all their work—should not be lost forever. They do not just feed our bodies, they nourish the community's spirit as well. 



Frances Townsend is a pastor in Michigan serving Onekama Church of the Brethren and Marilla Church of the Brethren.

## Leadership Team responds to proselytizing activities of Covenant Brethren Church

**T**he Church of the Brethren Leadership Team in mid-September issued a communication responding to proselytizing activities by the Covenant Brethren Church, a new group that is splitting off from the Church of the Brethren, while offering aid to district leaders during the division. It expressed strong support for church leaders and members who remain loyal to the Church of the Brethren.

The Leadership Team includes general secretary David A. Steele, Council of District Executives representative Cynthia S. Sanders, and the Annual Conference officers—moderator Paul Munday, moderator-elect David Sollenberger, and secretary James M. Beckwith.

“Discord and division are arising within our church body,” the communication said. “This reality has accelerated in recent weeks, as the Covenant Brethren Church launched an official recruitment effort. Congregations and individuals are being invited and sometimes urged to join their denomination, including Church of the Brethren leadership and portions of congregations that are being divided over this movement.”

This activity was identified as unethical proselytizing, citing the Church of the Brethren’s “Ethics in Ministry Relations” and “Congregational Ethics Polity.” The Leadership Team acknowledged that individuals have a right to choose their church affiliation but outlined measures “to preserve the integrity of the Church of the Brethren and our ministries in Christ.”

Sections of instruction were directed to the responsibilities of district and congregational leaders, with other sections stating a position against dual affiliations, citing the Church

of the Brethren’s *Manual of Organization and Polity* and *For All Who Minister*.

District leaders were called to uphold the best interests of the Church of the Brethren and to live out polity expectations. District leaders who have voted in favor of the withdrawal of congregations were instructed to resign from their positions. Districts were urged to provide care for loyal remnants in divided congregations. It was made clear that congregations or portions of congregations that vote to leave their district have ceased to exist or function as a congregation of the Church of the Brethren and are no longer eligible for representation at district conferences and Annual Conference. Loyal remnants of leaving congregations will be eligible for representation.

Pastors and congregational leaders were called to uphold the best interests of the Church of the Brethren, continue their commitment to baptismal and ordination vows, and adhere to ministerial and congregational ethics.

There will be no dual ordinations for pastors, dual memberships for individuals, or dual affiliations of congregations. “Such duality is not wise or healthy,” the communication said. “A choice must be made between the two denominations. Those who choose the Covenant Brethren Church must resign promptly from any leadership roles in the Church of the Brethren. . . . We would expect that people who are participating in efforts to separate from the Church of the Brethren would not be approved for further ministry in the Church of the Brethren.”

Find the full communication at [www.brethren.org/news/2020/leadership-team-issues-update-in-response-to-activities-of-the-covenant-brethren-church](http://www.brethren.org/news/2020/leadership-team-issues-update-in-response-to-activities-of-the-covenant-brethren-church).

### New policy for clergy continuing education

**A new policy for ministers to receive continuing education units** (CEUs) has been announced by the Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership and the Ministry Advisory Council.

“Recognizing that live participation is becoming increasingly difficult for multivocational ministers and given the growing library of

recorded webinars available from denominational agencies, the Brethren Academy is offering clergy the opportunity to view and report on prerecorded webinars and other educational events for CEUs,” said the announcement.

Eligible recordings must have been created by a Church of the Brethren agency, be no more than 10 years old,

and originally have been offered for CEUs according to the criteria set forth by the Brethren Academy. After viewing a recording that meets these criteria, ministers may complete an online report and submit it to the academy with the certificate fee. Find the policy at <https://bethanyseminary.edu/brethren-academy> under “Continuing Education.”



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## Bethany Seminary begins in person this fall

**B**ethany Theological Seminary opened the academic year with an increased overall enrollment, including new residential students relocating to study at the Richmond, Ind., campus. A total of 86 students began classes in August, including 30 enrolled at Bethany for the first time.

Sixty-three students this year are distance learners studying via video conference and remote-learning resources. The 23 residential students include 15 who live in a group of Bethany-owned houses near campus known as “The Neighborhood.”

The seminary put extensive COVID-19 protocols in place for in-person classes. See [Bethanyseminary.edu](http://Bethanyseminary.edu).

## Personnel notes

**Founa Augustin-Badet** has been named director of Haitian Ministries for Atlantic Southeast District in a new part-time position. She works with the 7 churches who use Kreyol as their primary language and make up 40 to 45 percent of the district.

**Steve Bickler** and **Margaret Drafall** concluded their work with Brethren Press on Aug. 28 because of financial difficulties in budgets for this year and next, including a significant drop in sales due to the pandemic. Bickler was the warehouse/shipping specialist for Brethren Press and also worked in Building and Grounds. He worked for the denomination for more than 42 years, beginning with Brethren Press March 20, 1978. Drafall was a customer service specialist with Brethren Press for more than 13 years, since March 26, 2007.

**Andie Garcia** resigned July 21 after a year as system specialist for Information Technology for the Church of the Brethren.

**Esther Harsh** has resigned as Northern Ohio District youth coordinator, a position she held for more than three years, to pursue a master’s degree. Jenny Imhoff is interim youth coordinator.

**Kevin Kessler** has resigned as district executive minister of Illinois and

Wisconsin District, effective Dec. 31. He has filled the half-time role for 14 years while also pastoring Canton (Ill.) Church of the Brethren, a role he will continue. He began with the district on Jan. 1, 2007, and is one of those with the longest tenure on the Council of District Executives. He served on the Ministry Advisory Council during creation of the 2014 Ministerial Leadership polity and has served as co-chair of the Illinois Conference of Churches.

**Scott Kinnick** has resigned as district executive minister for Southeastern District, as of Dec. 31. He has held the position for four years, since September 2016. He previously filled three pastorates.

**Jon Kobel** concluded his work as Annual Conference assistant on July 31 due to budget shortfalls. He worked for the Church of the Brethren for 21 years. He began on June 21, 1999, as manager of the Office of the General Secretary assisting former general secretaries Stan Noffsinger and Judy Mills Reimer. He was conference assistant since June 2009, with a wide range of duties including working onsite at each Annual Conference.

**Steve Lipinski** retired Aug. 5 as manager of Brethren Foundation Operations for Brethren Benefit Trust. Sherri Crowe, client manager for the

Brethren Foundation, is assuming the duties of manager of Brethren Foundation Operations.

**Jon Prater** began July 21 as part-time director of Ministerial Services for Shenandoah District. He also pastors Mount Zion-Linville Church of the Brethren in Virginia.

Brethren Volunteer Service workers who have ended or are beginning terms of service with the Church of the Brethren: **Susu Lassa** on July 17 ended a year as associate with the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy; **Alton Hipps** of Bridgewater (Va.) Church of the Brethren and **Chad Whitzel** of Easton (Md.) Church of the Brethren began Aug. 10 as assistant coordinators for the Workcamp Ministry; **Evan Ulrich** began July 24 with Brethren Disaster Ministries in Dayton, Ohio.

## Remembering first pastor lost to COVID-19

**Timothy Sites, 60, interim pastor** of Leake’s Chapel Church of the Brethren in Stanley, Va., passed away from COVID-19 on July 16. His is the first known death to COVID-19 of an active pastor currently serving a Church of the Brethren congregation. He served in Shenandoah District.

# Back-Pocket God Thinking bigger

**W**hen talking about youth and emerging adults, one of the questions that I hear most often is: “How can we keep young people in the church?”

We love our young people, and want to see them connect to God, and to continue the work that we have been a part of for so long. Most churches see young people as the future of



GABE DODD

the church. But perhaps you have noticed a pattern in your church that sees fewer young people connecting or reconnecting with your congregation.

After nearly two decades and four waves of continued engagement with thousands of youth and emerging adults, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) has confirmed recent claims of the growing population of young people who identify themselves as “not reli-

gious” (also known as the “nones”). Through interviews, researchers discovered a few overarching themes: For one, they found that most emerging adults do claim to believe in God, but do not want to associate themselves with their religious organization or their denomination. And second, most emerging adults have a lack of knowledge, interest, and articulation to put their religious/spiritual beliefs into words.

When asked to describe how they view life, many emerging adults see God as just one thing among many things in their lives. The research describes a simple and personalized spirituality that boils down to several core tenets such as self-evident morals, karma, no regrets, religion is easy, and a theology that focuses only on happiness.

This idea that God can be accessed on command, when it is convenient to us, only to receive what we imagine we need from God, paints a picture that God can be carried around in our back pocket—much like an app on our phone that can be “on” in the background, and hidden when we are focused on other things.


*Back-Pocket God* is the fourth and final installment of this NSYR research that has influenced many books and pastors and helps us understand how young people understand and

relate to God. It shines a light on important patterns related to emerging adults who stay religious, leave religious affiliation, or become religious. Another recurring theme is the importance of family and household, as committed and returning emerging adults typically have religiously engaged parents or families of their own.

Personally, this research has helped me get a bird’s-eye view of how young people practice their spiritual life, and the role religion has played in their lives. The more I learn about these issues, the more complex the topics become. That’s fitting, because emerging adults have complex relationships with the church and its members. The efforts required to mend these relationships often do not seem attractive, worthwhile, or even possible to individuals who are less spiritual or religious.

If the church’s attitude toward these fragile church members is only that they are the future of the church, I don’t see why the trends listed above won’t continue to be our reality. This is instead an opportunity for the church to take discipleship seriously, where Jesus takes people as they are and helps them see and experience how reconciliation and healing can happen.

Young and immature souls are the church of today, as well, and they are crying out for two-way, authentic relationships. As the NSYR research underscores, they need to know about their identity in God, the space in the church that makes them know they belong, and a purpose in God’s great story.

The church would do itself a favor to debunk what data shows many people assume: that God only cares about happiness. Imagine how discipleship in the Church of the Brethren would be changed if we created space for people to express gratitude, share stories, and interpret stories in light of God’s continuing work in the world. That sounds like a church I would be excited to be a part of—and perhaps one that would excite our young people, too! 

Gabe Dodd has been pastor for youth and young families at Montezuma Church of the Brethren in Dayton, Va., and is starting in November as pastor of Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren in Hagerstown, Md. He is a graduate of Eastern Mennonite Seminary.



## ABOUT THE BOOK

**Title:** *Back-Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults*. **Authors:** Melinda Lundquist Denton and Richard Flory, based on data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). **Publisher:** Oxford University Press (April 2020). **Pages:** 288 (hardcover). Available via [brethrenpress.com](http://brethrenpress.com).

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## SHADOWS

BOOK I

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### Taking Jesus' name in vain

After reading Wendy McFadden's column, "In the name of Jesus" (July/August), I thought this might be of interest.

In the name of Jesus, Annual Conference adopted the "Human Sexuality" paper in 1983. I think this was as bogus as Sir John Hawkins selling slaves from a ship named "Jesus," and Sallman's head of Christ as a white-skinned, blue-eyed savior. I'm not sure that Annual Conference in 1983 was well-intentioned, just as I am not sure if the Brethren today are willing to correct the injustices we have piled upon gay people. We have had 37 years to realize that, just maybe, if Jesus were here he would drive us out of our church. We have broken Jesus' second commandment to love our neighbor.

Responding to the question in the last sentence of the publisher's column, "Are we willing to look unflinchingly at

the ways . . . we have taken the name of Jesus in vain?" I hope so. However, the Leadership Team of the Church of the Brethren has not expressed any interest in doing so.

**Ron Lutz**  
Harleysville, Pa.

### Get used to being uncomfortable

What if Peter had called on the Jerusalem church to hold a prayer meeting to discern whether he should visit Cornelius? What if the church had appointed a commission to determine whether Paul should begin his missionary journeys, and where he should go, and whether Paul was the right one to send on any missionary journey, given his earlier life as a persecutor of the church?

I can tell you where I stood during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s: "Slow down, be patient, Dr. King. Don't rush us. Change is difficult. We



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might agree with you about lynchings and police brutality and racial injustice. But stop stirring us up with your rhetoric, even your biblically correct rhetoric! Give us good Christian people some time to correct the evils you have clearly and properly brought to our attention and we will convince the rest of our society to make the necessary changes. But please stop upsetting the apple cart. It makes me/us so uncomfortable! Look at all the conflict, confusion, and violence you are creating. Please stop!”

That’s the stance I took then, until I began to re-read the New Testament through the lens of Jesus’ revolutionary message: “Repent! for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” I noticed how Jesus kept turning the social and religious customs upside down. He even questioned the accepted interpretations of the Torah (the Jewish Bible) and dared to challenge the defenders of the status quo. It’s no comfort to remember that he was crucified for his

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trouble, since he didn't offer his followers a bed of roses.

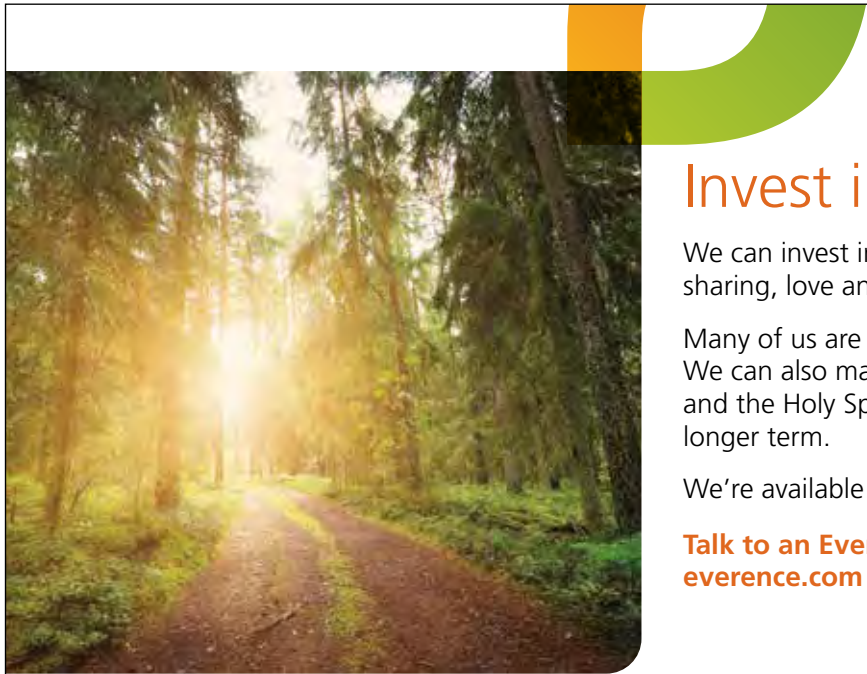
If justice isn't part of the Christian gospel, if denouncing racism and police brutality and discrimination against refugees and oppressive laws and practices doesn't fit into the Christian message, then perhaps God needs to send another Jesus into the world to straighten us out. And if that means turning the world upside down, I guess we comfortable Christians will need to get used to being uncomfortable!

**Horace Huse**  
 Toledo, Ohio

### Questions

A recent letter chastising On Earth Peace for joining the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests prompts me to finally ask questions of all my "anti" brothers and sisters in our denomination.

Do you eat bacon, ham, pork? Crab, oysters, escargot? Lobster, clams? Eel,



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snake, turtle soup? Do you observe the Leviticus scriptures regarding women and childbirth? Etc., etc., etc.

If one verse is a “no-no,” then why not all of the Old Testament laws of that time? Why is one verse more important than the rest?

**Ruth Lininger**  
La Verne, Calif.

## Our awesome God

It has now been three years since Penny and I attended our first and only Annual Conference. Twenty hours before arriving in Grand Rapids, Mich., we wrapped up a long, hot day of work in Circle,

Alaska, to begin the three-and-a-half-hour drive south to Fairbanks. When we arrived at Conference, we felt like a fish out of water. “All these white people.”

We quickly understood the importance of our responsibility. Seeing our personal photos on the big screen was surprising. When one of the highlights on the missions report was the cultural exchange between the Dine, Athapascan peoples from central New Mexico, and the Gwich'in, Athapascan peoples from Circle, Penny and I were floored.

It's all about our awesome God. How could it not be? Two-and-a-half months before we began our first summer in

Circle, we didn't know each other. As a longterm volunteer on a Brethren Disaster Ministries site, I had five days to convince a complete stranger God wanted her to marry me, spend each summer above the Arctic Circle in Alaska, live in a Native American village, and learn together how to grow gardens. I think our God has such a sense of humor.

To make the cultural exchange happen, liberals and conservatives never spoke of their differences. We celebrated our passions, and people have seen Jesus in all of us.

**Bill Gay**  
Freeport, Mich.

An online form is now available to submit information for Turning Points. Go to [www.brethren.org/turningpoints](http://www.brethren.org/turningpoints).

Or send information to Diane Stroyeck at [dstroyeck@brethren.org](mailto:dstroyeck@brethren.org) or 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120. Information must be complete in order to be published. Information older than one year cannot be published.

## Centenarians

**Haring**, Jean, 100,  
Quakertown, Pa., Aug. 1

## New members

**Gettysburg**, Pa.: Audrey Chapman, Brett Chapman, Phyllis Fahnstock, Glenn Heflin, Levato Thomas, Amber Wagner, Charlie Wetzel

**Middlecreek**, Rockwood, Pa.: Joyce Friedline, Jack Tressler, Sue Tressler

**White Oak**, Manheim, Pa.: Allison Kampen, Mya Zook

## Wedding anniversaries

**Angle**, Clyde and Beverly, Lititz, Pa., 60

**Brown**, Maurice and Jane Phyllis, Glen Arm, Md., 69

**Eby**, Jake and Dorothy, Dallas Center, Iowa, 70

**Fry**, Robert and Suzanne, Leaf River, Ill., 55

**Hanes**, Glenn and Doretha, Knoxville, Md., 69

**Hernandez**, Reynaldo and GlendaRae, South Bend, Ind., 60

**Hershberger**, George and Wilda R., Woodbury, Pa., 70

**Johnson**, James and Barbara, Plymouth, Ind., 60

**Miller**, Paul and Patricia, Harrisburg, Pa., 65

**Nelson**, Robert and Ferald Grey, Winston-Salem, N.C., 69

**Payne**, Maurice and Betty, Knoxville, Md., 69

**Rehn**, Frank and Ila Jane, Johnstown, Pa., 70

**Shively**, Lynn and Lynne, Lancaster, Pa., 55

**Shubert**, Lee and Arlene, Quakertown, Pa., 50

**Starr**, Glenn and Linda, Plymouth, Ind., 55

**Stinebaugh**, Vernon and Angela, Lancaster, Pa., 78

**Wampler**, Rick and Joyce, Bridgewater, Va., 50

**Warner**, John and Grace, Palmyra, Pa., 50

**Weaver**, Ralph and Mary, Palmyra, Pa., 72

## Deaths

**Ake**, James Alvin, 85,  
Martinsburg, Pa., July 29

**Anderson**, Ralph A., 90,  
McVeytown, Pa., July 16

**Badell-Slaughter**, Cindy, 59,  
Glendale, Calif., Aug. 5

**Baker**, Patricia Ann Wooters, 81,  
Greenwood, Del., July 2

**Boyer**, Robert E., 86,  
Kittanning, Pa., April 8

**Brandt**, Betty George, 88,  
Palmyra, Pa., Jan. 27

**Brewer**, Ruth Royer Ickes, 98,  
Dallas Center, Iowa, May 22

**Bridgeman**, Doris L. Shenk, 88,  
Lancaster, Pa., July 2

**Buck**, Esther L. Miller, 91,  
Palmyra, Pa., March 16

**Christner**, Jay Lewis, 90,  
Somerset, Pa., Aug. 3

**Crago**, Florence Marie Baker, 95,  
Colorado Springs, Colo., July 31

**Christner**, Jay Lewis, 90,  
Somerset, Pa., Aug. 3

**Crago**, Florence Marie Baker, 95,  
Colorado Springs, Colo., July 31

**Eckroth**, Helen R. Eckenrode, 95,  
Pottsville, Pa., Jan. 5

**Fletcher**, Michael Lynn, 65,  
La Quinta, Calif., Aug. 13

**Fox**, Charles, 84,  
Chambersburg, Pa., July 19

**Fox**, Dickie Clinton, 71,  
Snead, Ala., July 18

**Funderburg**, Harry Melvin, 95,  
New Carlisle, Ohio, Aug. 4

**Hartman**, Janet Arlene Endres, 95,  
Elizabethtown,

Pa., July 2

**Hartsock**, Betty M. Yoder, 89,  
Lewistown, Pa., July 15

**Jewart**, Charles W., 88,  
Creekside, Pa., June 18

**Kepner**, Anna Marguerite, 92,  
Gettysburg, Pa., April 12

**Klahre**, Donna Wingard, 86,  
Martinsburg, Pa., July 12

**Kreider**, Esther B., 96,  
Lititz, Pa., May 14

**Lloyd**, Sandra Dorothy Snyder, 78,  
Charlottesville, Va., July 24

**McCaffrey**, William (Merle), 94,  
Polo, Ill., May 24

**McKenzie**, Yvonne Kenyon, 87,  
Huntingdon, Pa., July 22

**Meyer**, Lorraine L. Knie, 86,  
Mount Morris, Ill., May 23

**Miner**, Doris Jean Barton, 93,  
Gettysburg, Pa., Sept. 7, 2019

**Minnich**, James H., 75,  
Lititz, Pa., Feb. 22

**Myers**, Mary V. Weaver, 68,  
Gettysburg, Pa., Dec. 15

**Pair**, Irma I. Buskohl, 95,  
Mount Morris, Ill., June 8

**Pryor**, Lucille Mae Flory, 93,  
Hagerstown, Md., Aug. 14

**Rein**, Mildred A. Groff, 91,  
Palmyra, Pa., May 30

**Ressler**, Stephen K., 54,  
Newmanstown, Pa., Feb. 10

**Rice**, Joseph Walter, 93,  
Charlottesville, Va., July 21

**Ruff**, Phyllis Kingery, 87,  
Altoona, Iowa, Aug. 3

**Runkle**, Miriam A. Gingrich,

87, Palmyra, Pa., July 24

**Schlosnagle**, Lisa Lynn George, 57,  
Accident, Md., July 18

**Schman**, Carmen Louise Deskin, 96,  
Dallas Center, Iowa, July 20

**Shipp**, George David, Jr., 82,  
Charlottesville, Va., Aug. 9

**Sites**, Timothy Lee, 60,  
Broadway, Va., July 16

**Snyder**, George Henry, 80,  
Crawfordsville, Ind., July 4

**Swank**, Donald Maynard, 90,  
Plymouth, Ind., July 14

**Thatcher**, Helen P. Freidly, 99,  
Lancaster, Pa., July 14

**Tilley**, Jay, 90,  
Winston-Salem, N.C., July 21

**Wagner**, David S., 56,  
Gettysburg, Pa., Jan. 27

**Willwerth**, Miriam M. Groff, 81,  
Lititz, Pa., April 8

**Zimmerman**, Phyllis M. Bare, 86,  
Lititz, Pa., April 12

## Placements

**Bosserman**, Sandra, plural ministry team, Cabool, Mo., Aug. 16

**Hostetter**, John, interim pastor, Mount Wilson, Lebanon, Pa., July 1

**Houser**, Jennifer, team pastor, Crest Manor, South Bend, Ind., Aug. 1

**Houser**, Zechariah, team pastor, Crest Manor, South Bend, Ind., Aug. 1

# TURNINGPOINTS

# Asking the right questions

**A**s a group of us carpoled to a district event, our conversation touched on a wide array of topics: family, congregational happenings, current events, and the business agenda awaiting us at the meeting. Then the driver offered an interpretive twist on Jesus' statement,



GLENN MCCRICKARD

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

This travel companion's version: “Where two or three are gathered together there are five or six opinions.” The observation elicited laughter and nods of agreement.

There is nothing wrong with differing opinions. In fact, five or six or even more opinions contribute to healthy and vibrant conversations. However, if the opinions are spoken in a manner that is meant to manipulate or demean, then the group process can break down. Instead of a meaningful discussion, conflict emerges over the validity of the opinions in an effort to gain the upper hand.

Years ago, I was in a Sunday school class that discussed Sharon Ellison's book *Taking the War Out of Our Words*. I found her model of communication (which she calls “Powerful Non-Defensive Communication”) to be engaging and hopeful. Her premise for better communication is to seek to “rid ourselves of defensiveness and power struggle.” In other words, how we talk to each other matters.


Ellison takes into account how our tone of voice, body language, attitudes, and the words we choose to say affect conversations. She developed a model of communication

that uses thoughtfully worded statements, questions, and predictions to foster a way in which we can listen and speak in a non-defensive manner. I am struck by the impact the right question can have on opening up a conversation where individuals had once been stuck in conflict or a power struggle, and even silence.

Once I was officiating a funeral for the mother of a family I didn't know. I invited the family to meet with me so that I could learn more about her and understand their wishes for the service. When we came together, there was more than the awkwardness of not knowing anyone in the room; I could sense tension between family members. Yes, they were grieving, but something else was happening, too.

I learned their mother had been in a nursing home for the past two years. The decision to admit her to a facility was difficult, and the siblings were still not in agreement. When I invited the family members to describe their beloved, I received only a word or short phrase from each one in the room.

My approach was not working. Then I recalled something I had learned from Ellison. According to her, questions needed to be grounded in curiosity rather than sounding interrogative. So, I went back to the individual words they offered and asked, “How did you experience this in the life of your mother?” Somehow that question allowed each one to relax, which led to a plethora of stories. Some of the stories had never been shared before.

In that moment, I witnessed how a question could foster conversation and healing. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” 

Glenn McCrickard is pastor of Westminster (Md.) Church of the Brethren.

I AM STRUCK BY THE IMPACT THE RIGHT QUESTION CAN HAVE ON OPENING UP A CONVERSATION WHERE INDIVIDUALS HAD ONCE BEEN STUCK IN CONFLICT OR A POWER STRUGGLE, AND EVEN SILENCE.

Suggested date: December 13

# Rejoice: Sing a new song

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in  
God my Savior, for he has  
looked with favor on the  
lowliness of his servant.”  
-Luke 1:46-48



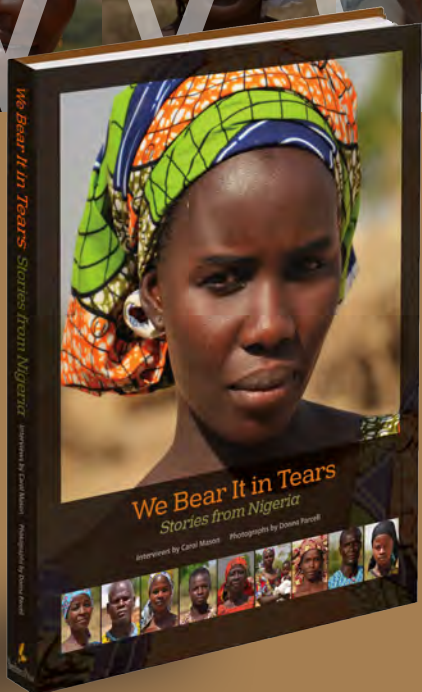
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