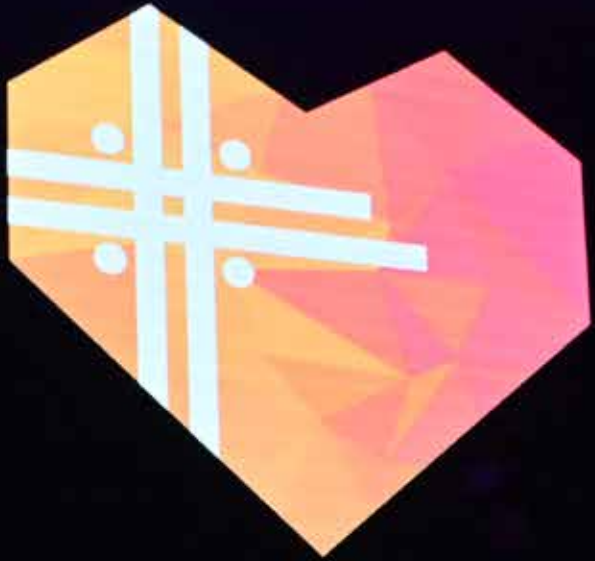


CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# MESSENGER

SEPTEMBER 2024 WWW.BRETHREN.ORG



# WELCOME+ WORTHY

ROMANS 16:2 (CEB)





*Photos by Eric Miller, Donna Parcell, Smith Gameti, and Roger Padilla*



# Mission Offering

## A helping hand

“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

~Romans 14:19, NRSVUE

*Suggested date: September 15*

[www.brethren.org/missionoffering](http://www.brethren.org/missionoffering)



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Church of the Brethren

Mission Advancement

[MA@brethren.org](mailto:MA@brethren.org)

An ice cream social in the exhibit hall at Annual Conference was provided by Eder Financial.



# CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN MESSENGER

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## on the cover

*A table of welcome was a recurring motif during worship services at Annual Conference. Photo by Glenn Riegel.*

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### Does your congregation have a unique way to celebrate Christmas?

MESSENGER wants to highlight the variety of cultures across the Church of the Brethren, and welcomes your Christmas story. Submit high-resolution digital photos and brief article to [messenger@brethren.org](mailto:messenger@brethren.org). Be sure to include your name, email address, phone number, and congregation. The deadline for submissions is Oct. 1.

# It's/Its September

**H**ere at **MESSENGER**, we recently learned that September is Be Kind to Editors and Writers Month.

Who knew! Apparently, it was initiated by a small publishing company in Texas in 1984. Will there be a 40th anniversary party this month?

You may wonder what editors do, since our work is fairly invisible. (My word processing software says the words “fairly invisible” should be changed to something more concise. Thanks, AI.)



WENDY MCFADDEN  
PUBLISHER

Yes, conciseness is important to an editor. So is clarity, accuracy, organization, proper punctuation, correct spelling, good syntax, parallelism, consistent voice, and the absence of cliches and dangling modifiers.

Throughout all that, the editor seeks to preserve the writer’s style and voice. When the editor has done a good job, the writer might say, “I don’t know exactly what’s different, but it’s just better.”

Not everybody thinks small bits of punctuation matter. North Yorkshire in England recently phased out apostrophes on its street signs, causing a small ruckus. Some of these street names “date back centuries,” the town acknowledged, and said it was reviewing the matter.

On the other side of the debate, linguist John McWhorter describes apostrophes as “decorative” and believes most could be eliminated. While his opinion might please schoolchildren, I respectfully disagree. I hope editors all around the world will agree that St. Marys Walk should have its apostrophe returned and be St. Mary’s Walk once again. (Even the pesky word processing software underlines “Marys” with a red squiggly line.)

But I’m amused that the North Yorkshire Council has apostrophes on its agenda, if that’s true. As one who mentally corrects signage all over the place, I have to applaud serious consideration of apostrophes, commas, em dashes, ellipses, and other such things.

To be clear, the point of consistency is not to ace the test in English class but to make the message understandable. (Perhaps you’ve seen this meme: “Let’s eat Grandma. Let’s eat, Grandma. Punctuation saves lives.”)

In other words, I do agree with linguist McWhorter that what’s most important is meaning. Our editors, whether they’re working away at the deep developmental editing of a book or the simpler editing of a short article, are dedicated to making the meaning clear and the writing effective.

That’s one of the ways editors and writers show kindness to the reader, who after all is of utmost importance. We hereby declare that September is Be Kind to Readers Month.

*Wendy McFadden*

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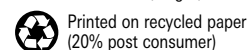
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**“A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.”** —Proverbs 11:25, NIV

**“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.”** —author C. S. Lewis

**“Find out how much God has given you and from it take what you need; the remainder is needed by others.”** —Saint Augustine

**“Charity, a word that comprises love and justice, may well be the most sublime of all Christian virtues.”**

—author Diana Butler Bass

**“Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know I am moving from fear to love.”**

—Dutch priest and teacher Henri Nouwen

**“The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But . . . the good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”**

—Martin Luther King Jr.

## BY THE DECADES

**In 1854**, 170 years ago, Daniel Leedy became the first Brethren minister on the west coast of North America as he settled in what was then the Oregon Territory.

**In 1879**, 145 years ago, Mount Morris College (originally Rock River Seminary and College Institute) was established in Illinois, and Ashland College was established in Ohio, each holding its first classes that fall. Mount Morris in 1932 became part of Manchester College (now University) in Indiana, while Ashland College became a school of the Brethren Church after the denomination’s late-19th-century split.

**In 1894**, 130 years ago, the church approved outdoor tanks and pools for baptism services.

**In 1939**, 85 years ago, the church established the Brethren Service Committee to aid relief efforts for those suffering the effects of war and organize conscientious objectors for service. Five years later, BSC purchased the former Blue Ridge College campus in New Windsor, Md., as a base of operations.

**In 1994**, 30 years ago, Bethany Theological Seminary relocated its campus from Oak Brook, Ill., to Richmond, Ind., where it continues to operate today.

## WELCOME MAT-CH

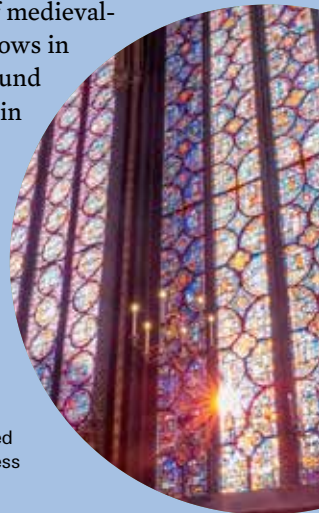
**In honor of this year’s Annual Conference theme**, “Welcome and Worthy,” can you match the word for “welcome” at left with the language in which it is written, at right? Answers are below.

- |                          |                      |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>1. Willkommen</b>     | <b>a. French</b>     |
| <b>2. Witamy</b>         | <b>b. Czech</b>      |
| <b>3. Bienvenue</b>      | <b>c. Portuguese</b> |
| <b>4. Bienvenido</b>     | <b>d. Indonesian</b> |
| <b>5. Selamat datang</b> | <b>e. Hausa</b>      |
| <b>6. Vitejte</b>        | <b>f. German</b>     |
| <b>7. Welkom</b>         | <b>g. Dutch</b>      |
| <b>8. Velkominn</b>      | <b>h. Swahili</b>    |
| <b>9. Bem-Vindo</b>      | <b>i. Icelandic</b>  |
| <b>10. Karibu</b>        | <b>j. Spanish</b>    |
| <b>11. Sannu da zuwa</b> | <b>k. Polish</b>     |

ANSWERS: 1-f; 2-k; 3-a; 4-j; 5-d; 6-b; 7-g; 8-i; 9-c; 10-h; 11-e.

## DID YOU KNOW?

**The world’s largest stained-glass** window is located in Justice, Ill., a few miles from Chicago’s Midway Airport. The window, located in Resurrection Cemetery, covers more than 22,000 square feet. The largest number of medieval-era stained glass windows in one building can be found at Chartres Cathedral in France, which contains more than 150. Paris’ Saint Chapelle is noted for its collection of soaring stained glass, with 15 panels each nearly five stories tall.



Sources: Cumberland Stained Glass Inc., Facts.net, Guinness Book of World Records.

## Revitalized and reinvigorated

**F**irst Church of the Brethren in Baltimore, Md., had a problem. The church needed to find a replacement for their pastor, who left in early 2022. Perhaps even more concerning, the church was feeling the challenges of a dwindling congregation.

Not far away, pastor Keith Carter had a problem, too. He was leading a Baptist congregation in Maryland that had a healthy membership but lacked a permanent church home.



First Baltimore's pastor is Keith Carter.

During First Baltimore's search process, Carter was a guest preacher at First Baltimore and made an immediate impression. Soon thereafter, in late summer 2022, he was hired as pastor at First Baltimore. But he didn't come alone—he brought members of his congregation with him, blending the two groups, and declaring, "We are now Brethren."

Carter quickly got to work. He visited church members who had fallen ill and began organizing a path forward for the church. He personally helped make repairs to the ceiling in the fellowship center, and he repaired and repainted the church sign outside. It was so well done that one parishioner initially thought it had been replaced entirely. Carter also served a Mother's Day breakfast for the entire congregation.

In the two years since his arrival, the church has been reinvigorated. Church groups are active and growing. Sunday school attendance and youth



The church hosted an Easter egg hunt for the neighborhood.

ministry have gotten stronger. Services have a robust music program with a choir and musicians, and church fellowship has improved. The church has expanded its community outreach, hosting an Easter egg hunt for neighborhood children and supporting a local United Methodist church's effort to serve those in need. Attendance at love feast was so large that the church had to modify its plans for the foot-washing ceremony.

With these changes and hope for the future, a revitalized First Baltimore has much to be thankful for.

—John Fleming (this story first appeared in the newsletter of Mid-Atlantic District)



**You too can uke!** Muskegon (Mich.) Church of the Brethren has been offering free ukulele lessons to the public over the past two years. The program is led by pastor Steve Hale and consists of four classes, finishing with a Sunday morning "Blessing of the Ukuleles." The lessons are geared for adult beginners. Styles taught include classic rock, country, and southern gospel. Graduates of the program receive a free instrument. Many of the graduates return to practice and play in the praise band on Sundays. The ukulele band also plays a starring role in the congregation's "Hee Haw Live" evening on the first Friday of the month, May through September—a singalong with free pop and popcorn provided. The next ukulele lessons begin Sept. 17. —Carol Strayer and Tom Wagner

## ANNIVERSARIES



The members of Goshen City's anniversary committee are Joyce and Jim Sumpter, Gary Haney, Regina Roberts, and Michelle Blough.

### Celebrating 125 years

**Goshen (Ind.) City Church of the Brethren** is celebrating its 125th anniversary.

Between the fall of 1895 and the fall of 1898, elders from neighboring Brethren congregations held tent meetings and rented halls for services in hopes of establishing a congregation within the Goshen city limits. A site was purchased in late fall 1898 and construction of a brick building began in spring 1899.

Dedication of the building and the first worship service were held Nov. 29, 1899, at the corner of Fifth and Clinton streets. In 1958, it was decided to erect a new building—the present home of the congregation—at the same location. The first service in that building was held March 8, 1959.

This milestone anniversary is being

celebrated by updating the church history, honoring families of charter members, and inviting former ministers to preach at special services. These include Beverly Weaver, Steve Norton, and Yvonne Riege, who will preach on Sept. 29. The church is currently led by pastor Kurt Borgmann. —Michelle Blough

### Celebrating 100 years

**Midland (Mich.) Church of the Brethren** is celebrating its 100th anniversary.

The first official meeting of the congregation was held on Jan. 17, 1924, for the purpose of organizing a Sunday school and church services. There were 16 people present at the meeting in Brother George Martin's home. The first gatherings were in a brick school building on East Ellsworth Street. On June 15 that year was the church's first revival meeting, led by Brother S. J. Burger from Auburn, Ind. An organizing meeting where 24 members were present decided on the name First Church of the Brethren of Midland.

The centennial celebration service is planned for Sunday, Oct. 13. Every month there has been a special event as part of the centennial, such as an ice cream social and game night on July 17. The church is pastored by Gabe Nelson.

—LeAnn Hadley



Midland (Mich.) Church of the Brethren



Sen. Jerry Moran and McPherson College president Michael Schneider announce new federal funding for the college.

## Millions more for McPherson

**McPherson (Kan.) College** this summer received \$2.1 million in new, congressionally directed funding through the efforts of Sen. Jerry Moran.

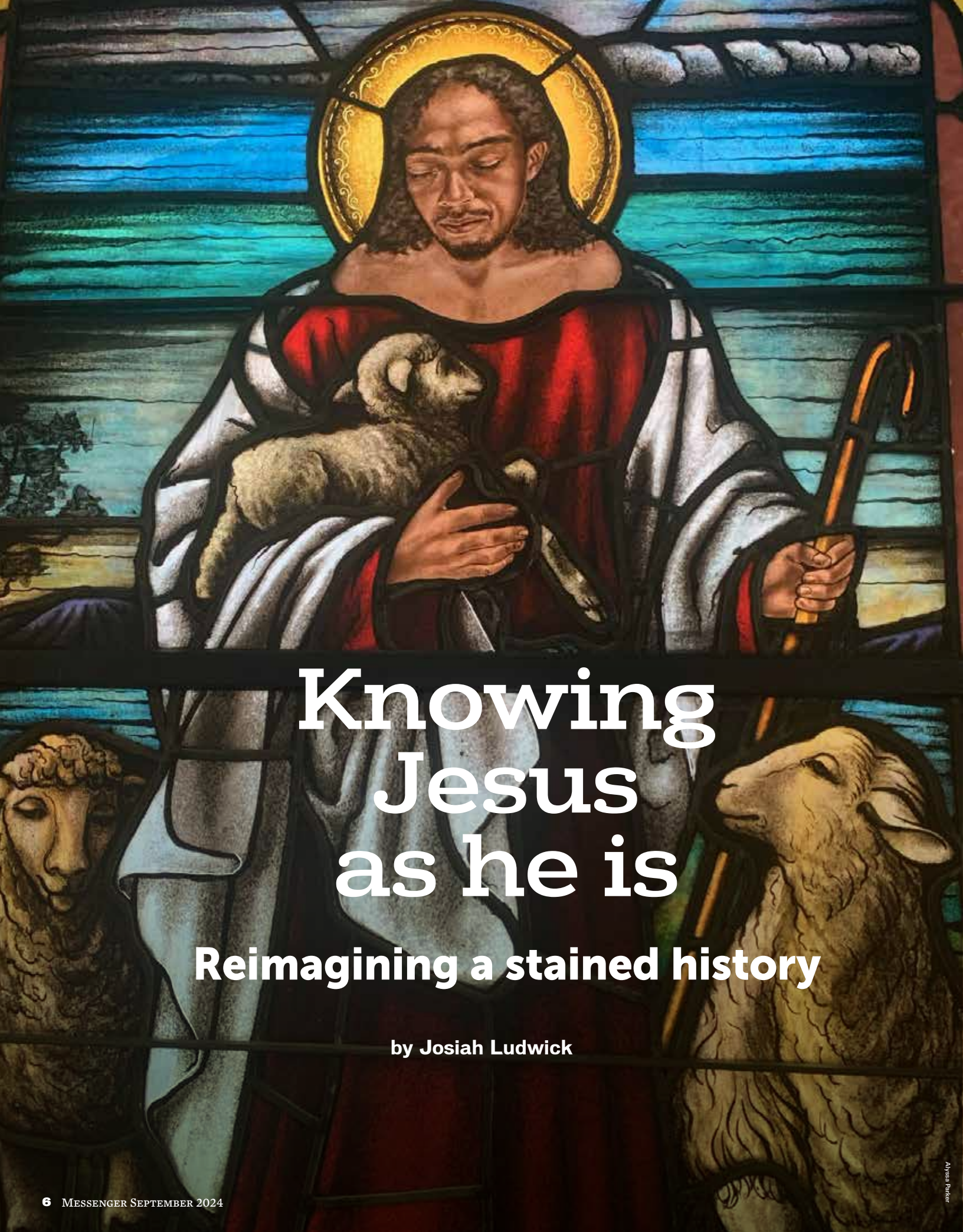
“The federal funds will support the college's initiative to create an educational center in Kansas for Rural and Community Health Science,” said a release. “The college has made progress toward this goal by introducing a new health science program where students focus on clinical, administrative, behavioral, or community health academic emphasis. In 2019, it partnered with the McPherson Center for Health to provide experiential learning opportunities for students.”

McPherson plans to modernize parts of Melhorn Science Hall, including laboratory and technology enhancements to support anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, public health, and behavioral health studies, with some of the new funding to be used for professional development.

The release noted that this is the first time in the college's history that it has secured federal funds through congressionally directed spending.

“Senator Moran is a true champion for Kansas,” said McPherson president Michael Schneider.

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.



# Knowing Jesus as he is

**Reimagining a stained history**

by Josiah Ludwick

**T**his past April, we welcomed guests from across the country into our worship space at Harrisburg (Pa.) First Church of the Brethren to celebrate the life of our dearly departed pastor Belita Mitchell. It was a wonderful celebration that emphasized the impact of her ministry within our congregation and throughout the denomination. In my remarks, I alluded to the fact that “it brings me great joy to know that she lived to see the first fruits of a process that was a long time in coming.”

Those who have visited our space in the past will agree that our sanctuary is beautifully adorned with stunning stained-glass windows, installed decades ago. However, Pastor Belita was one of the first to begin a conversation about the images, their whiteness, and whether they still suited the faith community we have become. That conversation, begun nearly 15 years ago, fizzled initially before gaining steam in recent years.

For Harrisburg First Church, this has been an extensive journey, full of twists and turns. Some long-time members believed that the windows were fine as is and shouldn't be touched. A newer family, who has now become integrally involved in all facets of our ministry, shared that they almost didn't come back after their first visit because of the windows. When they decided that Harrisburg First would be their faith family, they did so with the understanding that they would continue to press this issue in hopes of moving the conversation forward.

So what's the big deal? Why is it important to be thinking about ethnicity in the images of Jesus in our stained-glass windows? Some may simply say,

“It isn't.” But here at Harrisburg First Church of the Brethren—where our mission says that “we are called to be a Christ-centered, multicultural community in the inner-city, sharing the love, healing, peace, and justice of Christ”—it has become extremely important to have these conversations. Our windows, which once brought people into worship, have for some become a stumbling block impeding their ability to do so.

In 2020, we were blessed to be taught about the whitening of Jesus



*This is the original version of the window pictured on the facing page.*

over time, and how that coincided with things going on in the world like colonization, chattel slavery, the Doctrine of Discovery, and the concept of manifest destiny. Dr. Drew G. I. Hart led us through a series of sessions in which we looked at who Jesus was, what he taught, and how he lived. We learned about Jesus centering his ministry on those who society saw as less than. We recognized how Jesus sought out the least, the last, and the lost in his society.

Then we looked at early images of Christ, which predated the age of colonization. It is striking to see how imag-

es of Jesus weren't about conquest. They didn't feature the cross at all. There was no standard depiction of Jesus. His likeness was contextual, depending on where the artist or viewers found themselves. In some areas, his complexion was darker. In others, more white European.

It was during the time of Christendom's height that the church had given Christians license to kill in the name of God and to “civilize,” proselytize, and in many cases just take land and property. In the eyes of the church, land inhabited by Indigenous non-Christians was literally considered empty and therefore open for conquest. The subjugation of people as property soon followed, all under the banner of a white Jesus. It was during this time of plundering and enslavement that the idea of whiteness and white supremacy was born.

It follows that Jesus as “White Savior” was constructed, justifying these ideals. This is when we start to see a white Jesus imposed on other cultures as the norm and the accepted depiction of Christ. The problem with a white Jesus is not just the historical inaccuracy. It is also a theological perversion “tying our Savior to the oppressors instead of the oppressed, the crucifiers instead of the crucified,” says Hart. This man who lived, died, and was raised to life, all for the least, last, and lost of his society, had been and still is utilized as “a mascot for social domination.”

Upon learning more about this, our church was eager to move on with this project. Holding space for those who were with us on the journey but were still working through questions they had, we hosted a world café congrega-

“Our windows, which once brought people into worship, have for some become a stumbling block impeding their ability to do so.”

tional discussion. Members shared their thoughts and questions about the iconography of the church and the window project. Through these discussions, we were able to receive feedback about how our members wanted to move this project forward.

We established an iconography team tasked with the creation of an iconography policy for our congregation. This policy states that we will be mindful of the images we use in worship, both in online and printed materials, as well as the art we display in our building. Further, we have decided to be intentional about not displaying Jesus as European. Instead, we use images that align with how we have come to know Jesus. For us, “Jesus came as a person of color, a Mediterranean Jewish peasant under the oppressive empire of Rome,” as our policy states.

In addition to a policy, the team was tasked with inquiring about costs and managing the project to change some of our existing windows. To be transparent about which funds would contribute to the window project, we formed a separate clearing account called the iconography fund and began to raise funds specifically for the window modifications.

To date, we have modified two windows in the front of our sanctuary. Jean Alexander, an African American stained-glass artist from California, designed the new images of Jesus. We worked with a local company for the glass installation.

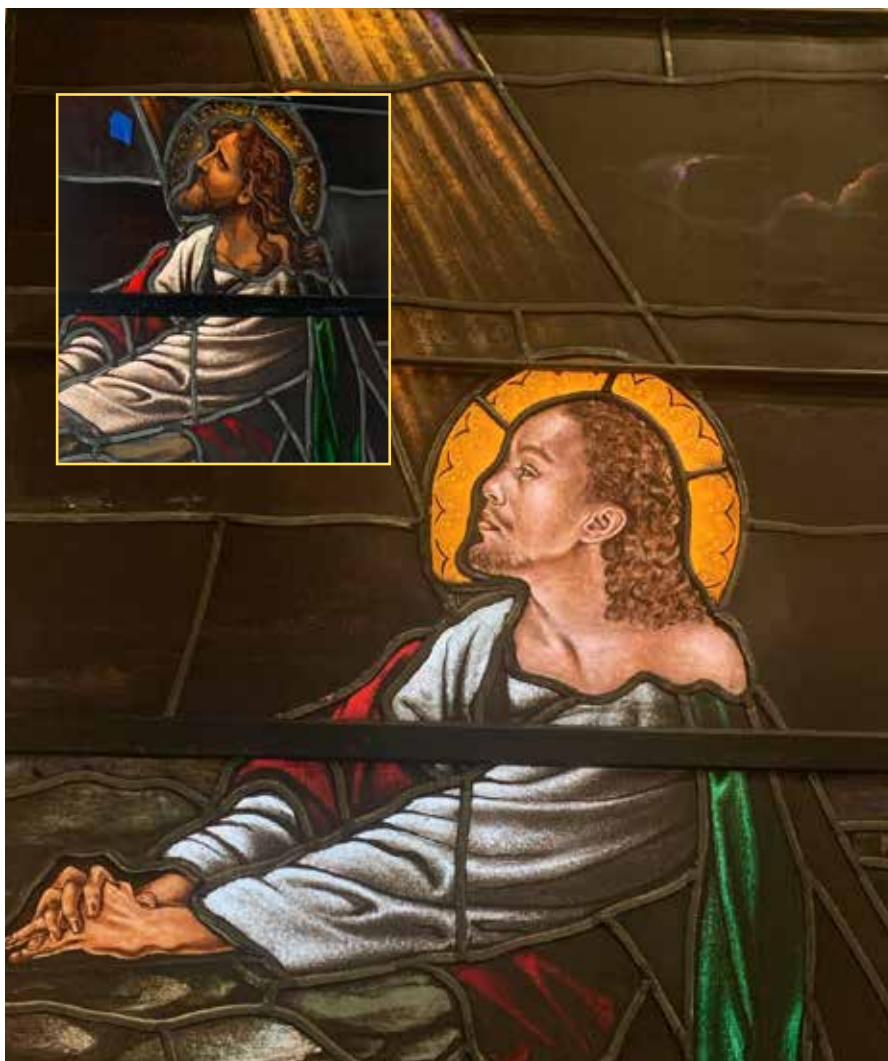
We are just beginning, but the results are beautiful and breathtaking.

We plan to modify other windows in our worship space and dream of one day creating an entirely new biblical stained-glass window scene.

For us, it’s about presenting Jesus as he is. A conversation that started long ago with observations from Pastor Belita, a conversation that died down and lost steam and then was reinvigo-

rated in the past five years, has manifested into something beautiful and new. Once again, I am filled with joy that she was able to see some of it come to be. ❧

Josiah Ludwick is a pastor at First Church of the Brethren in Harrisburg, Pa., and serves on the Mission and Ministry Board of the Church of the Brethren.



Alyssa Parker

“To date, we have modified two windows in the front of our sanctuary. Jean Alexander, an African American stained-glass artist from California, designed the new images of Jesus.”



# A common clutch

**W**hat do troops, towers, clans, and parliaments have in common? They all represent collective nouns of various animals—in this case gorillas, giraffes, hyenas, and owls.



KEN FRANTZ

Most of us have heard of flocks of sheep or goats, but what about flocks of lice or fleas? We can agree on herds of elephants or buffaloes, but does a herd of wrens really make sense?

Some familiar usages just fit: a gang of weasels, a swarm of bees, or a bevy of swans. But who first imagined a gulp of swallows or a bale of turtles? What about a rout of snails, a coterie of prairie dogs, or (my new favorite) a

husk of jack rabbits?

It would seem easy enough to identify singular animals, but the rub is in generalizing them into groups. Who, after all, would argue with a rhumba of rattlesnakes, a crash of rhinoceroses, or a prickle of porcupines? It is less clear what a knob of waterfowl might refer to or whether multiple labels should apply to worms that might be assembled in beds, clews, clats, or bunches.

If one is not familiar with the vocabulary, it becomes easy to dismiss these words as arcane and unhelpful. Yet there is something valuable in posing new ways of looking at names for these collective groups.

Challenges are inherent when identifying common descriptors for religious groups, particularly Christians. What are we to be called? A pod of disciples, a knot of Pharisees, or even a nest of vipers? All could be descriptive of followers of the Way at various moments in history. Do the business workings of your particular religious framework remind you of a congress of salamanders—slow, deliberate, and in no hurry to arrive at conclusions?

What does a non-Christian conclude regarding the vari-

ety of labels we offer up? What does it mean to be Orthodox or Catholic, Protestant or a fundamental Pentecostal? Are we to be viewed only as evangelicals or Baptists? Are Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Lutherans, charismatics, Anglicans, or Methodists next in line and ripe for labeling? What of the non-Trinitarian groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses or Latter-day Saints?

And then there is that whimsical Church of the Brethren bunch that has sparked so many conversations. Curious folk indeed!

Each group speaks in different ways to its adherents and disciples. That should be of little surprise given the differences between people in general. Why then are we so insistent there is only one path to understanding? Literalism gleans precise answers from scripture, but absolutism remains part of the greater mystery that confronts us.

Be aware when you declare yourself “Christian” that the self-projection of that notion may not be at all what others see. One of the greatest critiques of the church in general is that it is plumb full of hypocrisy. What better place to learn of another and better way of living than in exploring together the mystery of the Divine? Even hypocrites are worthy of grace, perhaps more so than the most devout among us.

Whatever collective group you identify with, do so with openness and awareness. Recognize labels that are helpful rather than those that alienate and divide. Will you prefer to be identified as a flock (birds), a dray (squirrels), a venue (vultures), an ambush (tigers), or chattering (starlings)? Does a dazzle of zebras sound better? How about an exultation of skylarks?

Now we’re getting somewhere. In the kingdom of heaven that Jesus places before us, isn’t it great to all be part of the same clutch?

Ken Frantz is a non-salaried ordained pastor serving Haxtun (Colo.) Church of the Brethren.

“Whatever collective group you identify with, do so with openness and awareness. Recognize labels that are helpful rather than those that alienate and divide.”



# WELCOME+ WORTHY



**Serving on the Annual Conference Press Team**—overseen by News Services director Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford—were writers Frank Ramirez, Frances Townsend, and Virginia Rendler; photographers Glenn Riegel, Donna Parcell, Laura Sellers, and Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford; and website staff Jan Fischer Bachman and Russ Otto.

Find full coverage at [www.brethren.org/news/coverage/ac2024](http://www.brethren.org/news/coverage/ac2024).

Order video Wrap Up and Sermons DVDs and downloads at [www.brethrenpress.com](http://www.brethrenpress.com).

## AC 2024 BUSINESS

**T**he delegate body handled numerous business items during the 2024 Annual Conference, led by moderator Madalyn Metzger with moderator-elect Dava Hensley and secretary David Shumate.

### Review and Evaluation Committee

A mandate and an extension of term of service were approved for the next Review and Evaluation Committee.

Left: delegates at tables. Below, top to bottom: delegates in line to speak; moderator Madalyn Metzger and moderator-elect Dava Hensley; Mennonite Church USA guests Glen Guyton and Shé Langley enjoy the ice cream social in the exhibit hall.



Glenn Rhegel



Glenn Rhegel



Donna Parcell

A new Review and Evaluation Committee is called in the fifth year of each decade to evaluate the organizational structure and procedures of the Church of the Brethren.

The term of service was extended from two years to up to four years at the recommendation of the Standing Committee of district delegates, foreseeing that the task may require more time at this point in the life of the denomination.

The committee of five at-large members of the church will be elected by Annual Conference in 2025 and will have until 2029 to bring back a report and recommendations.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**7 churches were welcomed:** 1 congregation: **East Dayton (Ohio) Fellowship** in Southern Ohio/Kentucky District. 1 fellowship: **Jesus Lounge Ministry**, Delray Beach, Fla., in Atlantic Southeast District. 5 projects: **Arbor Park Church of the Brethren**, Lancaster, Pa., in Atlantic Northeast District; **Iglesia del Salvador Viviente**, McFarland, Calif., in Pacific Southwest District; and **Monte De Dios**, Eden, N.C., **Monte de Hermon**, Bassett, Va., and **The Way**, Roanoke, Va., in Virginia District.

**1,450 people registered** including 410 delegates and 1,040 nondelegates (45 virtual).

**\$47,065 total was received in offerings:** \$16,994.42 for the Core Ministries of the Church of the Brethren with a focus on Global Mission and Discipleship and Leadership Formation, \$8,134.35 for the Conference operating budget and \$6,681.35 for Conference programming for children and youth, and \$15,255.24 for the Witness to the Host City to Kids' Food Basket and Sleep in Heavenly Peace.

**30 beds were built for Sleep in Heavenly Peace** by Conferencegoers who volunteered for the service project.

**\$10,375 was raised by a Silent Auction** for Conference translation and interpretation expenses and the Conference operating budget.

**\$8,328 in donations** was received, separate from the worship offerings, including \$1,198 for Conference operations and \$7,130 for Core Ministries.

**\$8,200 was raised by the quilt auction** for hunger relief. The Association for the Arts in the Church of the Brethren (AACB) announced this was their last quilt auction at Annual Conference.

**121 units were collected by the blood drive**, a collaboration between Brethren Disaster Ministries and Versiti Blood Center of Michigan.

**About 200 people took part in the vigil against gun violence** held in downtown Grand Rapids, sponsored by the Gun Violence Prevention Action Team and On Earth Peace.



Doreen Brunell

*Two young participants volunteer to build beds to benefit Sleep in Heavenly Peace, one of the recipients of the Witness to the Host City.*

### Query: A New Model of Denominational Structure

The concern of this query, which was brought by Miami (Fla.) Haitian Church of the Brethren and Atlantic Southeast District, was referred to the Review and Evaluation Committee. Among other things, the query notes “serious conflict and division around issues of human sexuality and biblical authority” and asks how a new model of denominational structure may give hope to those who are contemplating separation from the Church of the Brethren.

Characterized as speaking on behalf of the multicultural sector of the church, the query sparked much discussion at the microphones including appreciation for the focus on “how” and for the Haitian Brethren bringing the query, and anticipation of an opportunity to work in a more structural way toward becoming a truly multicultural denomination. Questions about the query included, among

## BEHIND THE SCENES

**T**hose who pay attention to the closed captioning at Annual Conference might have noticed that the English was better than in previous years. Not surprisingly, though, it was flummoxed by other languages.

The closed captioning this year was thanks to artificial intelligence, or AI. This process is not unlike other increasingly common tools, such as automatic transcription of virtual meetings and predictive text in emails. Years ago, closed captioning was handled by a person sitting behind the curtain, and later by a remote person with headphones.

Closed captioning is important for people with hearing impairments or for whom English is not their first language.

### Other accessibility efforts at Annual Conference:

Spanish-language programing was expanded this year, with two Spanish-speaking table facilitators in the delegate

hall, and a Bible study and an equipping session provided in Spanish with translation into English. Business items and table questions were translated into Spanish.

Worship bulletins were translated into Spanish and Haitian Creole. Decisions about what to translate into Haitian Creole were made in conversation with Founa Badet, director of Intercultural Ministries and pastor of one of the Haitian congregations.

Translation of worship services into Spanish was organized by Cesia Salcedo-Morrison and carried out by a group of volunteers. Translation of business sessions into Spanish was done by professional translators from the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan. This was relatively affordable in Grand Rapids, though might not be in other cities, according to Conference director Rhonda Pittman Gingrich.

The Church of the Brethren video report, *Take Heart*, was presented in three

languages—English, Haitian Creole, and Spanish. A few announcements were also provided in three languages.

Annual Conference partnered with the Anabaptist Disabilities Network to work at accessibility for people with disabilities. This year, construction projects around DeVos Place and the Amway Grand hotel posed additional challenges for those with mobility issues.

Livestreaming, which began during the pandemic, continued to be provided for people who wanted to participate without traveling to Grand Rapids. To compensate partly for the additional costs for streaming (direct costs run between \$15,000 and \$25,000), the fee for virtual participants was increased by \$45.

A question facing planners is how to increase accessibility when expenses far exceed income. Annual Conference has been posting a deficit of about \$50,000 each of the last two years and will likely do the same this year.

others, questions about its assumption that inclusiveness with regard to sexuality and ability to be a multicultural church are opposing values.

In pre-Conference meetings of Standing Committee, the moderator explained that potential outcomes of the query may include districts changing from being geographically based to being theologically aligned.

### Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee

Two recommendations brought by this committee were approved, including:

- a **3.3 percent cost of living adjustment** for the minimum cash salary table for pastors for 2025;
- revisions to the pastor's **Housing Equity Fund**, a savings fund that enables pastors who live in parsonages to purchase their own homes after leaving the parsonage. The fund was moved from a mutual fund account to a qualified church retirement account held by Eder Financial.

### Interim revisions to agency polity

Temporary revisions to the polity of two Annual Conference agencies—Bethany Theological Seminary and On Earth Peace—were approved pending approval of the agency covenants that are being developed. The memorandum of understanding with Bethany updates the seminary's polity regarding its board of trustees. On Earth Peace's polity revision updates that agency's bylaws to meet diversity commitments on its board.



Glenn Hiegel



Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford

Praise and worship highlighted the Spanish Speaking Brethren Leaders Luncheon.



Laura Salinas

**Delivering 103 blankets that they tied themselves,** the third to fifth grade children's group visited the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital. Leaders Angi and Scott Harney of Elkhart, Ind., and their congregation, Creekside Church of the Brethren, donated the fabric and cut out the blankets in advance. The children tied a fringe on each one as their service project. This was the largest donation of blankets the hospital has received, as well as the first donation ever from children, according to Karen Juno of the hospital staff.



Chris Bunnburgh-Covford

**International guests were welcomed by moderator Madalyn Metzger** during the opening business session: from Nigeria, the new president of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria **Daniel Y.C. Mbaya**, accompanied by five members of the B.E.S.T. evangelism trust; from India, **Darryl Sankey and Cornelius Solomon**, trustees of First District Church of the Brethren; from South Sudan, Global Mission staff **Athanasus Ungang**; from the Dominican Republic, president **Ariel Rosario** and moderator **Faseli Nolasco de Acevedo** of Iglesia de los Hermanos; from Spain, president **Santos Terrero Feliz** and youth pastor **Tanses Terrero Matos** of Iglesia de los Hermanos—Una Luz en las Naciones; from Venezuela, president **Roger Padilla Moreno** of ASIGLEH; and from Burundi, president **Expert Bukene** of the emerging Church of the Brethren there.

### Interim reports from study committees

Three study committees brought interim reports:

- **Breaking Down Barriers—Increasing Access to Denominational Events**, which was granted another year to complete its work, including a feasibility study;
- **Standing with People of Color**, which is two thirds of the way through its three-year mandate to collaborate and develop materials for congregational, district, and denominational use;
- **Calling Denominational Leadership**, which is studying issues surrounding the Annual Conference nominations and elections process.

### Special Response Process

The Standing Committee of district delegates, which is tasked with reviewing the Special Response Process intended for use in the event the denomination must work through a strongly controversial issue, asked the Conference officers to bring names for a task team to carry out the review.



Glenn Rippeart

**The historic moment** when—for the first time in Church of the Brethren history—a woman handed the moderator's gavel to another woman happened at the close of the final business session, as 2024 moderator Madalyn Metzger passed the gavel to 2025 moderator Dava Hensley.

# WORSHIP



**“Let me repeat this: We are yearning to be in community with and for each other. . . . Being in community means walking beside each other even in disagreement . . . so that we can faithfully fulfill our calling to be Christ’s hands and feet.”**

— Annual Conference moderator Madalyn Metzger

**“Affirmation is stating that which is positive and true. The ultimate affirmation is that God loves you.”**

— Greg Broyles



**“I’m left with a gnawing question: What really matters? . . . As the Church of the Brethren, as followers of Jesus, what really matters? . . . Is it the people of the church or the issues facing the church?”** — Brandon Grady



**“Have you been both shaken and stirred? Are you still holding on to God and holding on to one another and your neighbor?”** — Leonard M. Dow

**“Look at each other the way you look at Christ. Love each other the way you love Christ. . . . Value others the way you value Christ. . . . I see it! I see Christ here in you.”** — Cindy Laprade Lattimer



**“Jesus, Holy One,  
You are ever-faithful.  
Jesus, draw us near,  
Gathered at your table,  
Gathered in your love.”**

— A song by Seth Crissman and Greg Yoder that the worship band— which also included Amber T. Harris, Jacob Crouse, Beth Jarrett, and Andy Duffey— incorporated into each day’s worship service as part of a “welcome table” liturgy. Shown here, pianist Jocelyn Watkins sings with the band, and organist Robin Risser Munday appears in the background. Throughout the Conference, the band invited various other musicians to join them.

## ELECTIONS AND APPOINTMENTS

■ **Annual Conference moderator-elect: Don Fitzkee** of Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren

■ **Program and Arrangements Committee:**

**Laura Sellers**, Happy Corner Church of the Brethren, Clayton, Ohio

■ **Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee, affirmed: Andrew Hamilton**, Southeastern District executive

■ **Mission and Ministry Board—Area 4: Colby Patton**, Wichita (Kan.) First Church of the Brethren; **Area 5:**

**Erik Brummett**, Live Oak (Calif.) Church of the Brethren; **affirmed: Daniel Landon Butler**, Ivester Church of the Brethren, Grundy Center, Iowa; **Edward Cesar-Fincher**, San Diego (Calif.) First Church of the Brethren; **Pete Kontra**, Atlantic Northeast District executive (ex officio)

■ **Bethany Seminary trustees—representing colleges:**

**David McFadden**, Manchester Church of the Brethren, North Manchester, Ind.; **affirmed: Patrick Chapman Starkey**, Cloverdale (Va.) Church of the Brethren



Glenn Rieggel

*Incoming moderator Dava Hensley (kneeling right) and newly elected moderator-elect Don Fitzkee are consecrated during the final worship service.*

■ **Eder Financial Board, affirmed: Jerry Patterson**, Manassas (Va.) Church of the Brethren; **Wayne Scott**, Mechanicsburg (Pa.) Church of the Brethren; **Donna Rhodes**, Stone Church of the Brethren, Huntingdon, Pa.

■ **On Earth Peace Board: Jennie L Waering**, Roanoke (Va.) Central Church of the Brethren; **affirmed: Priscilla A. Weddle**, Chesapeake, Va.; **Laura L. Hay**, Modesto (Calif.) Church of the Brethren; **Carol Young Lundquist**, Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren, Fort Wayne, Ind.

## Space for a story of grief and generational trauma

by Virginia Rendler

**attended the Women's Caucus Dinner** to hear Heidi

Ramer share about her mother's experience of sexual assault and trauma within the Church of the Brethren. If you're not familiar with the story, I encourage you to pick up a copy of *Her Words, My Voice* by Heidi Ramer, which includes excerpts from the personal diaries kept by her mother, Karen.

This is not my story to tell, but it is an important story and a part of our denominational history. I can share how it felt to be in the room listening to Ramer's description of grief and generational trauma.

Ramer talked about being welcome and worthy, the theme of the Conference. She posed questions to both herself and the audience: What do the words "welcome and worthy" mean, and what does a welcoming home or church community look like? I couldn't help thinking: How does that apply to situations of assault?

Ramer shared a definition: safety means feeling like one is worthy of protection. From her talk, I gathered that both Ramer and her mother had experiences of feeling welcome and worthy in the Church of the Brethren, and experiences of being made to feel unwelcome,

unsafe, unworthy of the protection of the church. Perhaps some of us can relate to that, in the Church of the Brethren or in other spaces.

I'm somewhat of a newcomer to the Church of the Brethren. This denomination consistently makes me feel welcome and worthy, which is what first called me to be a member. It was painful to hear the stories of people who have not been afforded this privilege.

If you have ever felt unsafe, unworthy, or unwelcome in a space of worship, you are not alone. There is still work to be done. This work is hard, but our community is worthy of the rewards of this



Donna Percell



Glenn Regel


**The last hurrah for quilting at Annual Conference** “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” So it says in scripture (Ecclesiastes 3:1), and so, it seems, is the case for the quilting bee and quilt auction sponsored by the Association of the Arts in the Church of the Brethren (AACB), which has done quilting at Conference since the early 1970s. Tara Hornbacker, who has been a main organizer and fixture of the event, recalled its history: “Over the years we used to also arrange for art exhibits and bus tours, but for the last 20 years we’ve focused solely on quilting. We had to change with the times. . . . Not a lot of churches are turning in blocks, so we made the decision to lay this down.” Added Margaret Weybright of Goshen, Ind., “We only had 48 blocks donated.” Hornbacker said that was enough for only four quilted wall hangings. She is grateful, however, for the heritage of the AACB. “I feel absolutely thrilled about all we have done all these years.” Said Conference director Rhonda Pittman Gingrich: “Over the years, hundreds of thousands of dollars have been raised to alleviate hunger, thousands of quilt blocks have been pieced together into works of art, millions of stitches have been stitched, and countless conversations have taken place and relationships built around the quilt frames.”

difficult reckoning. And if you have had the privilege, as I have, of feeling safe, welcome, and worthy in this church, I believe it is due in no small part to Karen’s words and her daughter’s courage to share them. I want to express my profound gratitude to both of them, especially as a young woman in the church.

In 2001, Ramer received her mother’s journals, telling Karen’s life story in “immaculate detail.” She shared the question this raised for her: Was receiving this story, this painful truth, a treasure or a curse?

When we face traumatic realities together, we grow stronger, and our community becomes more connected. People like Ramer sharing their stories, or the stories of their fami-

lies, give us a gift in the form of an opportunity. Opportunity for deeper and more honest connection to each other, connection to our shared humanity, and connection to our future and our past. As Ramer said, the truth strengthens and restores. But it can only do so when the truth is believed, and when lived experiences are given respect and weight.

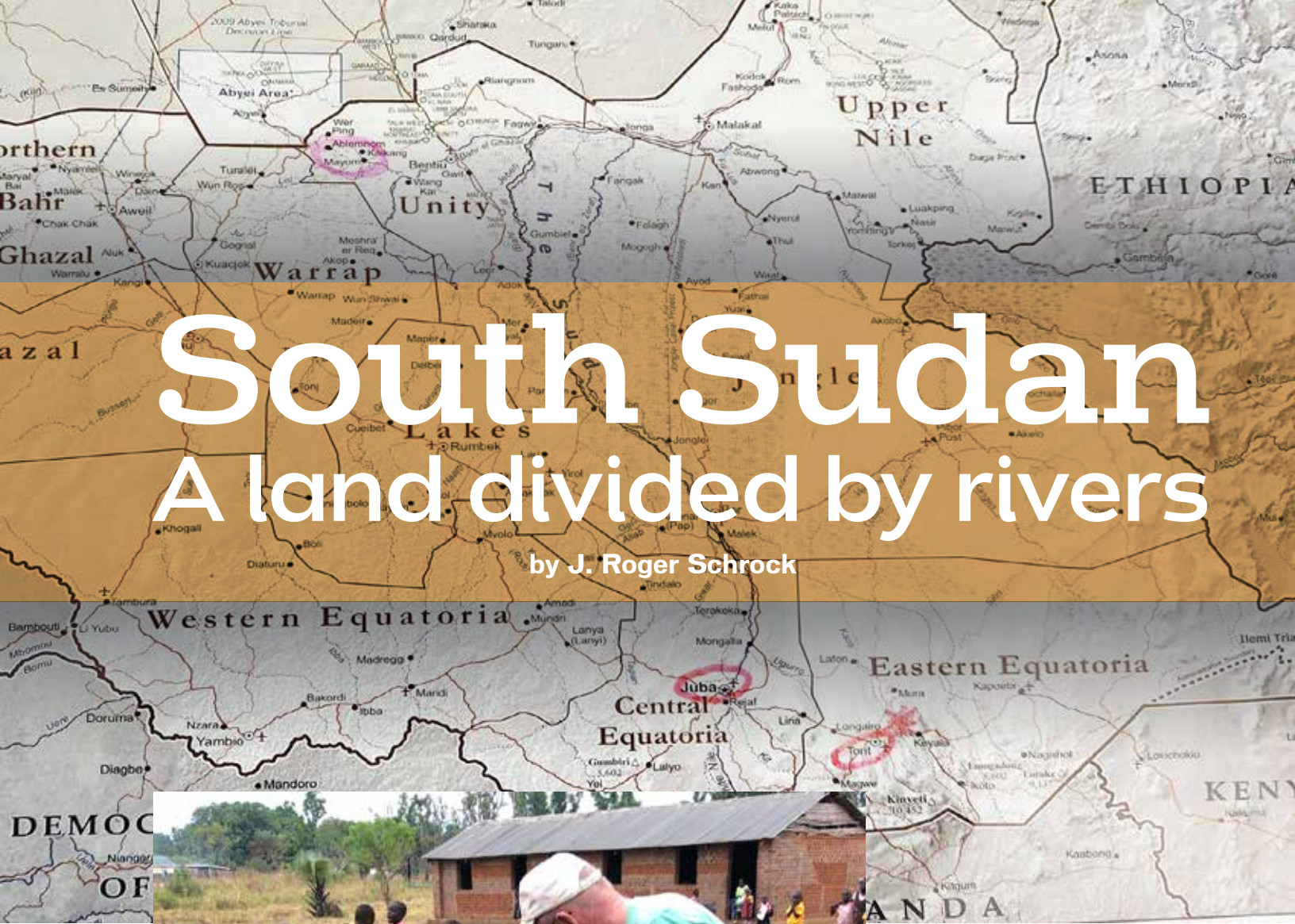
This knowledge of one another’s suffering, that we as members of a faith community are called to bear together—what a curse, but what a treasure. We need God to bear this curse with us, and to share this treasure—and we need one another. 

Virginia Rendler is volunteer coordinator for Brethren Volunteer Service.



Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford

Women’s Caucus speaker Heidi Ramer.



# South Sudan

## A land divided by rivers

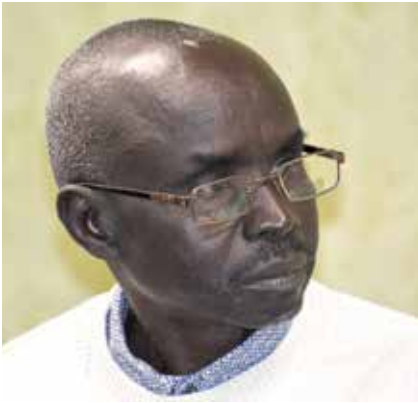
by J. Roger Schrock



**A**s a young boy in Sunday school, when I heard of the Israelites wandering 40 years in the desert, it seemed like a very long time. But now, as an adult, when reflecting on the 40-plus years the Church of the Brethren has been involved in Sudan, the time seems much shorter. The connections between the Church of the Brethren in the US and colleagues in South Sudan have been very significant, but drastically affected by political events and multiple eruptions of violence.

The Church of the Brethren history in South Sudan dates back to 1979, before the country existed, when the Sudan Council of Churches asked the Brethren to help establish a Primary Health Care Program. Between then and now, the area has undergone waves of civil war and violence that

“The focus for the work in South Sudan in 2025 is church planting, community development, and relief response in both Eastern Equatoria and Unity states.”



Global Mission staff Athanasus Ungang

have displaced many people over the years and caused destruction of civil government and infrastructure. Throughout, the Church of the Brethren has been active to varying degrees, offering peacebuilding, disaster relief aid, and development expertise, as well as ecumenical collaboration, Bible translation, and exploration of opportunities for planting the Church of the Brethren.

[For a detailed history of the Church of the Brethren involvement and mission work in South Sudan, see “A Legacy of Peacemaking in South Sudan” in the July/August 2023 MESSENGER.]

The map of South Sudan shows a country intersected by many rivers, with the dominant river being the White Nile. There are three areas where the Church of the Brethren has focused its work: Mayom in Unity State, Torit in Eastern Equatoria State, and Juba, the capital city of South Sudan.

In most recent years, leadership for the mission work in South Sudan has transitioned from American Brethren to South Sudanese led by Global Mission staff Athanasus Ungang. He had immigrated from South Sudan to

Sioux Falls, S.D., with his family. But then, in 2011, he was appointed South Sudan country director for the Church of the Brethren. He began partnering with the Africa Inland Church, an established South Sudanese denomination, to meet the needs of people in Eastern Equatoria State.

After more violence erupted between various ethnic groups and local communities in 2013, which made development and peace work impossible to achieve, the decision was made to form a humanitarian response organization as a local nongovernmental organization, or NGO, called Brethren Global Services. With leadership from Ungang, the ministries of this organization focused on trauma healing, agriculture, education, and repatriation of refugees. The work was focused in Eastern Equatoria, but the needs of the people were nationwide.

During visits from American

Church of the Brethren groups in 2023 and 2024, a clear call was heard from South Sudanese people and church leaders for the Church of the Brethren to return to Mayom and Unity State, location of the first Brethren work in the 1980s.

This call coincided with a decision to establish the church in South Sudan. Currently, Ungang is working to draw up legal papers for the official beginning of the Church of the Brethren in South Sudan. The government requires a minimum of five congregations to qualify as a denomination, and there are presently four congregations. By sometime in 2025, the Church of the Brethren in South Sudan will likely be recognized as a denomination.

The leadership for both Brethren Global Services and the emerging Church of the Brethren in South Sudan is coming totally from South Sudanese people. In addition to Ungang, the



People from Unity State meet with a Church of the Brethren group who visited South Sudan earlier this year, to advocate for church and service work in their state.

“ The South Sudanese firmly believe these words from Isaiah 18:7, and they ask the Church of the Brethren to walk with them as they move toward this vision of hope. ”

leadership of the emerging church includes Keribino Pow, Nyakanitha Magaw, Daniel Mawer, and others.


The focus for the work in South Sudan in 2025 is church planting, community development, and relief

response in both Eastern Equatoria and Unity states. Plans are to build a denominational headquarters in Juba. Church planting will include the establishment of congregations, training of pastoral leadership, and creation of the legal

structure for the new denomination. Work will be done with communities to determine their felt needs and assess their resources, with the expectation to work at agriculture, education, and health care.

The need for relief and rehabilitation will be a major focus because of the six-plus decades of violent destruction. It is hoped that internally displaced people and refugees will become able to return home and begin more normal patterns of living. In addition, there are nearly a half million refugees from the current conflict in the neighboring country of Sudan who have fled to South Sudan. The United Nations and other development agencies estimate that there are no families in South Sudan who are not suffering from PTSD because of the effects of violence and war.

With all the struggles and changes in venue and personnel, it would be easy to assume that the future is questionable for the emerging Church of the Brethren in South Sudan. But the South Sudanese will quote you Isaiah 18:7, from the Good News Translation, which says, “A time is coming when the Lord Almighty will receive offerings from this land divided by rivers, this strong and powerful nation, this tall and smooth-skinned people, who are feared all over the world. They will come to Mount Zion, where the Lord Almighty is worshiped.”

The South Sudanese firmly believe these words from Isaiah, and they ask the Church of the Brethren to walk with them as they move toward this vision of hope. May we eagerly journey with these sisters and brothers to Mount Zion. May peace prevail in this land divided by rivers. 

J. Roger Schrock, who has led numerous delegations to South Sudan, has served the Church of the Brethren as mission staff in South Sudan and as mission executive for the denomination. He just completed a term on the Mission and Ministry Board.



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# When the weeds take over

by Dana McNeil

**O**ver the last few years I have had an infestation of thistles in my vegetable garden. It started with the neighbor's bird feeder. But while it might be convenient to blame them, it became a problem when I didn't weed diligently enough, and the thistles went to seed and multiplied.

Now they are a problem. They will overtake anything I plant and starve what I want to grow by taking all the water and nutrients and sunlight for themselves.

They remind me of a good example about the kingdom of heaven. First, they bring to mind Jesus' words:

*"When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation" (Matthew 12:43-45).*


After I clean the thistles out, I have to be diligent, because the new seeds (both the ones I want and the thistles) grow easily in the cleaned-up garden. It is a constant reality that the thistles will try to take over again, and I have to be diligent to keep them at bay. Likewise, we must all be diligent to stave off the reinfestation that can happen in our lives with sin.

Second, it reminds me that it is much easier to stay diligent

and fight little battles against the thistles than it is to have to deal with them when they have taken over the garden. Likewise, it is easier to fight small battles with sin and temptation than it is to have to deal with sin that has taken over our life. Sometimes it might feel like I can deal with my temptations tomorrow or maybe that they aren't even a big deal right now, but they will become a big deal and be much harder to deal with when they become overwhelming.

Third, I need to remain vigilant in feeding and caring for the good things in the garden so they can fill the garden with good fruit. Sometimes in our battle against sin we forget to feed that which is good so it can fill the space that is left with good fruit. Then there is no emptiness for the bad fruit to take root. Feeding the good is much better than having to battle the bad. Feeding the good nourishes our spirit, and it draws us near to God—where we find rest, peace, hope, love, joy. Feeding the good keeps us focused and diligent and ready. Feeding the good keeps us working on that which helps us grow rather than worrying about what might destroy us.

When my garden is healthy and fruitful, the thistles don't have space to take root. And the few that crop up are easily taken care of. When I am focused on good fruit in my life, on growing in Christ and giving glory to God, the temptations and things that are designed to distract me and even to harm me are more easily dealt with and discarded.

No wonder Jesus talks about weeds so much. 

Dana McNeil is pastor of First Church of the Brethren of Peoria, Ill.

“When I am focused on good fruit in my life, . . . the temptations and things that are designed to distract me and even to harm me are more easily dealt with and discarded.”



# WHY DO THEY LEAVE HOME?

Gail Heisel



courtesy of Gail Heisel

## Learning from a border pilgrimage

by Phil Hofer and Gail Heisel

**F**our members of La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren joined a group of 13 people from the southern California area for an overnight visit to the border of Calexico, Calif., and Mexicali, State of Sonora, Mexico. Our visit was hosted by Justice for Immigrants Seeking Asylum and the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity.

The first stop was Calexico United Methodist Church, where pastor Baldwin Avendaño and his small congregation provide clothing, housing, and food to migrants who enter the US after they have applied for asylum in Mexico. Avendaño said that some 80 people a day are released by the US

Border Patrol and an additional 12 people a day are released from the immigration detention center nearby. Many go directly to family, friends, or other sponsors. Some stay in Calexico for a day or two. They can receive assistance from his church as well as a network of other providers. One room in the church is devoted to clothing and the pastor raises funds for meals and housing in local motels. Some also stay in the homes of local residents. Unfortunately, the city of Calexico has not permitted the church to use its facilities as a shelter.

The following day, Sisters Suzanne Janro and Lisa Busher of Border Compassion accompanied us across the border on foot. Then we took taxis

to Cobina Posada Del Migrante, one of a number of shelters in Mexicali. Border Compassion works with Cobina as a link between resources on the US side and the needs on the border in Mexico. The shelter houses women, children, and some men, providing hospitality to asylum seekers while they wait to hear about an interview with the US immigration service.

We visited the shelter on Children's Day, a special day in Mexico, and we shared art materials with the children as some members of our group encouraged creative projects. We know the children have experienced much pain. We also saw their resilience, and that of their families. Others of our group listened to the stories of the adults, as they shared the reasons why they came to the border, hoping to enter the United States. A number of the residents have had their applications for asylum turned down and are considering their options. Few can consider returning to their homes. They are fleeing for a reason.

**Why do they leave? There are as many stories as families.**

Many in Cobina are from the Mexican states of Guerrero and Michoacán, where the drug cartels and gangs have wreaked havoc on daily lives, particularly those of families with young men and families with financial means. One member of our group met Elfega, who owned some land in the state of Guerrero. Gangs told her she must turn over her land to them. Three sons had left before she did, somehow finding their way into the US. Elfega and her daughter fled—her daughter locating elsewhere in Mexico, Elfega at the border.

This was Phil Hofer's fourth visit to shelters and centers of help in border




Gail Heisel

cities. Each visit reminds him of the great needs of our neighbors, their strengths in seeking safety and security, and the efforts of people and organizations to meet those needs.

This visit reminded all of us that those needs continue, especially when the push of violence in other countries meets the push of stricter immigration policies by the US government. The visit reminded us of the need for continued advocacy for government policies that

recognize our collective humanitarian responsibilities, as people flee their homes to seek safety and shelter.

As we seek to be the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus, let us all care, give, and work toward a humanitarian response to the needs of our neighbors. 

Phil Hofer and Gail Heisel are from La Verne Church of the Brethren in southern California. Heisel serves on the Program and Arrangements Committee of Annual Conference.

# Abram builds an altar

Genesis 13:8-18

by Anna Lisa Gross

**T**his passage comes between the soap opera-style dramas with Pharaoh in chapter 12 and the war described in chapter 14. In this in-between, as Abram and his family pause in their transitions, Abram worships at an altar in his new homeland. But how easily that homeland might not have been his!

## Lot goes east

Yahweh opens Genesis 12 with a command and a promise. Abram probably began his trip from Haram to Canaan in spring when food for his flocks would be most plentiful. The travelers likely hugged the banks of the Euphrates before turning south to catch mountain streams through Lebanon, finally crossing west over the Jordan. In chapter 13, they return to Canaan, and now it's time to split up for the sake of harmony.

What if Lot had chosen Canaan, the western option? Abram might have become the minor character in this story! We can't know all the symbolism the author intended, but going east in the Old Testament is often moving *away* from blessing. Cain goes *east* of Eden after killing Abel, Babylon is to the *east*, and, though God is everywhere, these are times of feeling far from God.

We know stories of families falling apart over inheritance, business, prop-

erty. Abram lets Lot choose where they will each make their home, and, for now, everyone is getting along. As far as we know. We read throughout Genesis 12 and 13 that Sarai and Lot are along for the many moves, but we don't know how they felt about it.

Family moves are often for *one* person's calling or occupation. God continues to make plans and promises with Abram, and Abram makes questionable decisions that move them out of Egypt. Sarai and Lot have to pack up, again and again.

## Family meetings

When I was about 10 years old my dad and I went canoeing together. It was a special treat to be on the river and to have my dad's attention all to myself! But the memory is tinged with sadness for me, because out on the Eel River my dad explained that he'd been invited to move to either Elgin or New Windsor for his work with the Church of the Brethren, and he asked how I felt about moving. Though we had moved several times in my lifetime, all I could remember was North Manchester. Leaving my friends and starting over somewhere new was daunting.

A few days (or weeks?) later, my parents announced that we would *not* be moving, and I privately assumed it was my fault. Though they eventually

clarified that moving hadn't been anyone's first choice, that canoe trip reminds me that *my* limitations can let people down or hold them back.

So, if Abram never asked Sarai, Lot, or the rest of the group their opinion about all these moves, maybe he was doing them a favor!

## Before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah

Why do you think the author mentions (v. 10) that this is *before* the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah? Building suspense? Tensions for Abram, Lot, their families, and neighbors simmer under the surface, even in this moment of apparent harmony as Lot and Abram part ways.

We're tuning in to altars in this study. Altars proclaim the presence of God; they help us mark transitions. The foreshadowing of Yahweh's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah turns my mind to an unintended altar in Genesis 19:26—the pillar of salt that was once a woman looking back to her home and loved ones as she ran toward safety.

Think of collective, unplanned altars today: along the highway where someone was killed in a traffic accident, on the sidewalk after someone died in an act of violence, or outside their home when a celebrity dies. What marks the spot at which yet

“Love expressed between brothers and sisters in Christ is the visible sign that the church is full of God’s children.”

another boat filled with families fleeing war went down? We mark God’s presence when we feel God’s blessing (like Abram will do at the end of today’s reading) and when we are confounded by what appears to be God’s punishment or refusal to intervene.

### Language for God

God has about a thousand names in scripture, and the most common in the Old Testament is Yahweh, appearing in every book but Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. This name became so sacred and personal that eventually it was only spoken aloud by priests in the Second Temple. When the temple was destroyed, the name was not pronounced aloud anymore. Then “Adonai” was used aloud when “Yahweh” was written. Today, no one knows precisely how to pronounce Yahweh. English Bibles usually translate Adonai as “Lord” and Yahweh as “LORD.” The name Yahweh is most associated with God’s redeeming acts. Adonai literally means “my lord” and is also used between humans, such as in 1 Samuel 24:8.

### What altars are for

You might wonder if these “count” as altars. What is an altar, anyway? The word used in Hebrew (מִזְבֵּחַ) means *to slaughter* and in Greek (θυσιαστήριον) it means *place of sacrifice*. But humans have been building and using altars longer than we have been slaughtering or sacrificing at them. The earliest human altars were probably stacked stones or naturally high spots, decorated to mark how they point to the heavens. We have been using altars for all the history we know of to mark a place and/or time as holy. Perhaps the first “altar” in scrip-

ture is the sabbath, which God marked for rest, proclaiming that creation is very good (Genesis 2:3).

Cain and Abel bring offerings to God, but we hear more about the associated conflict than the location or method of their gifts (4:3-4). We remember Noah for building an ark, according to detailed specifications declared by God. After that he also builds the first (named) altar in scripture, and burns choice animals and birds on it (8:20). We don’t know if God asked for it, let alone provided instructions, but God is pleased with what may have been God’s first carnivorous experience. And perhaps God is inspired to declare: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (9:3-4).

### Who is special?

I feel even more guilty about my childhood reluctance to move when I think about the recent record-breaking numbers of refugees and displaced persons throughout the world: 110 million. These are asylum-seekers, not adventure-seekers. These are parents, older siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, carrying beloved babies and fragile hope toward any possible future they can find.

I was born into a loving, stable family in one of the wealthiest countries that has ever existed, with white skin and access to education and health care. Sometimes I have to stop and catch my breath when I consider how fortunate I have been. Does Abram feel staggered by the weight of his blessings? He settles into the shade of an oak tree and builds an altar to the Lord.

Though he is grateful, Abram isn’t necessarily *special*. God already tried


collective punishment: destroying nearly all life in a devastating flood and scattering all of humanity when they seek unity through a tall tower and common language. But God isn’t satisfied. If collective *punishment* isn’t working, maybe *blessing* all people through one family would work? “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . [I]n you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3).

### Stories change us

God says the same to all of Israel!

*“Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel? says the LORD. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7)*

Human hearts and minds are story-size. You won’t be changed by reading that there are a record 110 million refugees in the world today. But if you read a story of *one* family (or even better, *met* one family) who had to move far from home for safety, you would carry their story with you. God hopes to change the whole world through Abram’s family. Later, God will seek the same through Israel, not because they are more special but because God is loving and keeps promises:

*“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8a).* 

Anna Lisa Gross is a pastor at Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren in Fort Wayne, Ind.

# Church of the Brethren finances: *An explainer*

by Ed Woolf

**H**ow is it that the Core Ministries budget for the Church of the Brethren can be troubling even though net assets are high?

Let's first look at what makes up the Church of the Brethren's net assets. Net assets consist of everything the Church of the Brethren "owns," including cash, buildings, autos, land, and equipment, minus what it "owes," including liabilities, payables, and expenses. To put it simply, net assets are more than just available money.

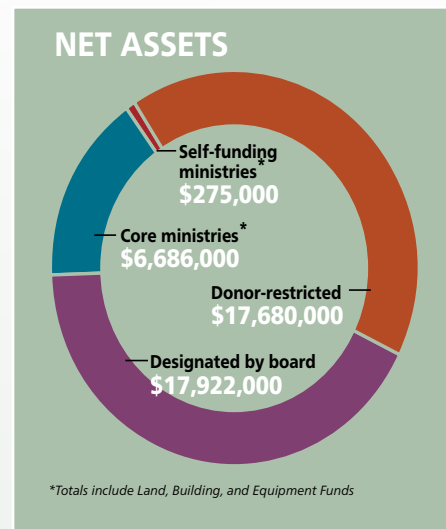
What about the increase in value of our net assets? Since investments make up the largest portion of our net assets, the total value fluctuates with the market. While net assets can increase dramatically because of investment gains, market losses can lower the value significantly. For example, investments lost \$8.4 million in 2022, lowering the net asset balance to \$39.7 million. The \$2.7 million investment gain in 2023 helped total net assets increase \$2.9 million, resulting in a year-end balance of \$42.6 million.

As we examine the net asset balance in more detail, not all assets are equal in regard to their "availability." It's important to note that the majority of

our net assets are either restricted by the donor or held in funds designated by the Mission and Ministry Board or its staff for particular purposes. At the end of 2023, \$17.7 million of our net assets were held in restriction.

Restricted funds include endowments, Emergency Disaster Fund, Global Food Initiative Fund, Haiti Medical Project, and many other funds that can be used only in certain ways. Another \$18 million of our net assets are designated for a specific purpose, including carryover funds, investment draws to support Core Ministries, Brethren Faith in Action grants, reserves for conferences, and many others.

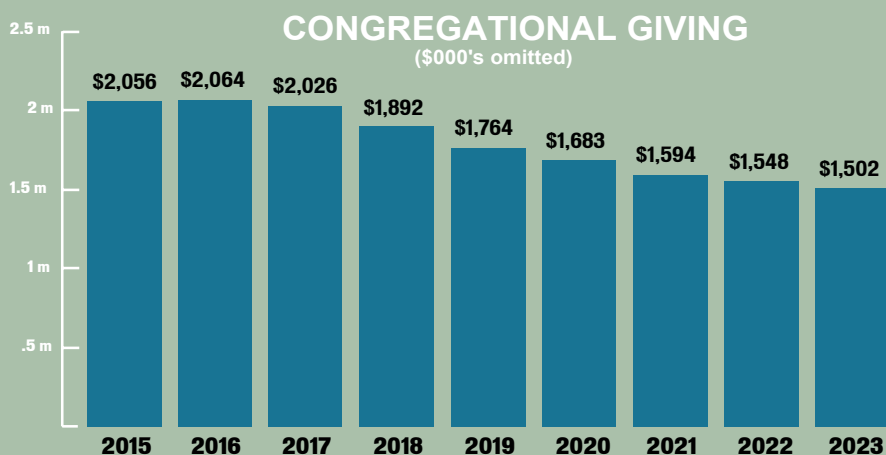
With designated funds, the board or staff may choose how they will be spent. For example, when the upper campus of the Brethren Service Center was sold in 2017, that income was put into a quasi-endowment (that is, an endowment set up by the board, rather than a donor). Today, proceeds from the quasi-endowment are used to give Brethren Faith in Action grants to congregations and camps, thus providing neighborhood seed money out of the legacy of the service work carried out for many years in New Windsor, Md.



Turning to our budgets, the Church of the Brethren has special-purpose funds that support Brethren Disaster Ministries and the Global Food Initiative. Two other ministries—Conference Office and Material Resources—are called self-funding because they cover their expenses with income from sources other than donations.

Many of the Church of the Brethren's ministries are in a centralized budget called Core Ministries. Some of the programs in the Core Ministries budget are Discipleship and Leadership Formation (which includes ministries such as Intercultural, Youth and Young Adults, and Ministry), Global Mission, Brethren Volunteer Service, and Office of Peacebuilding and Policy. The Core Ministries budget is supported by unrestricted giving from congregations and individuals.

Over time, combined giving from congregations and individuals has declined as the church becomes smaller. In 2023, combined giving to Core Ministries was \$105,000 below the year before. Congregational giving totaled \$1.5 million, a decrease of \$46,000, and individual giving was \$652,000, a



decrease of \$59,000.

Along with unrestricted giving, the Core Ministries budget is supported by investment draws from several designated funds under the board's manage-

ment. Through the budget process, the board sets the percentage draw that can be taken from a particular designated fund, to make sure income from that fund provides long-term sustainability.

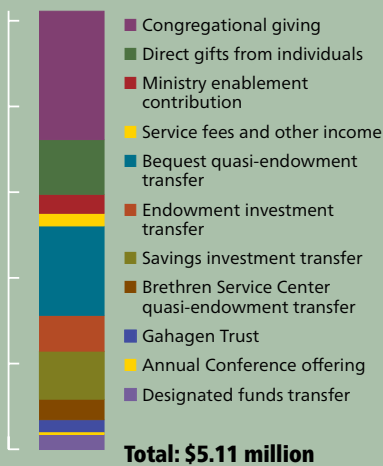
The Core Ministries budget relies heavily on draws from investment balances in the Bequest Quasi-Endowment Fund (19 percent), Brethren Service Center Quasi-Endowment Fund (7 percent), Savings Fund (5 percent), and Endowment Fund (5 percent), for a total of \$2.6 million in 2023. Without these draws from investments, the Core Ministries budget would face a substantial income deficit each year.

Last year, total income to Core Ministries was \$221,000 behind budget. The shortfall in income included the use of \$186,000 in designated funds (in addition to the draws from investment balances). Expenses were \$171,000 under budget, despite rising costs and high inflation. Even with lower expenses, Core Ministries ended the year with a net deficit of \$50,000.

What's most worrisome for the Core Ministries budget is that income sources have shifted from primarily donation support to having to rely on internal funds to make up the budget shortfalls. With this shift in support, the designated funds set aside for budget shortfalls are quickly diminishing. The 2024 budget includes a very large transfer of designated funds that, if used, would practically deplete the designated funds set aside for future budget shortfalls.

The Church of the Brethren is grateful to be blessed with a healthy net asset balance. This is important for the Church of the Brethren to carry out its ministries and to provide mutual support to the larger church body with grants through the Ministry Assistance Fund, Emergency Disaster Fund, Global Food Initiative Fund, Brethren Faith in Action Fund, and other designated funds.

### CORE MINISTRIES 2023 INCOME

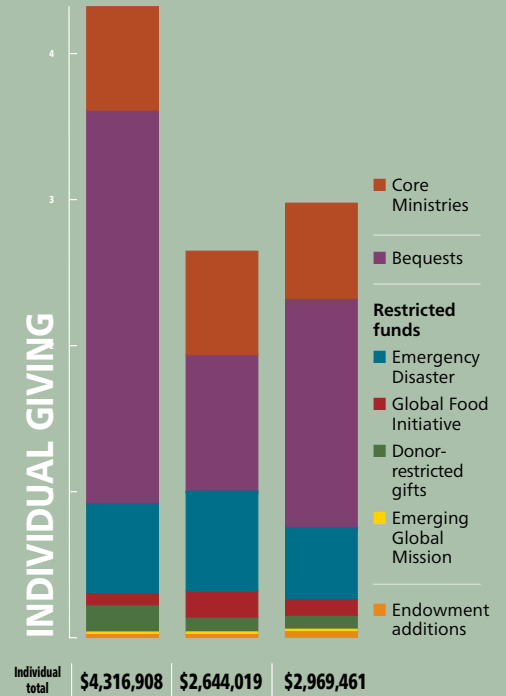


### CORE MINISTRIES 2023 EXPENSE

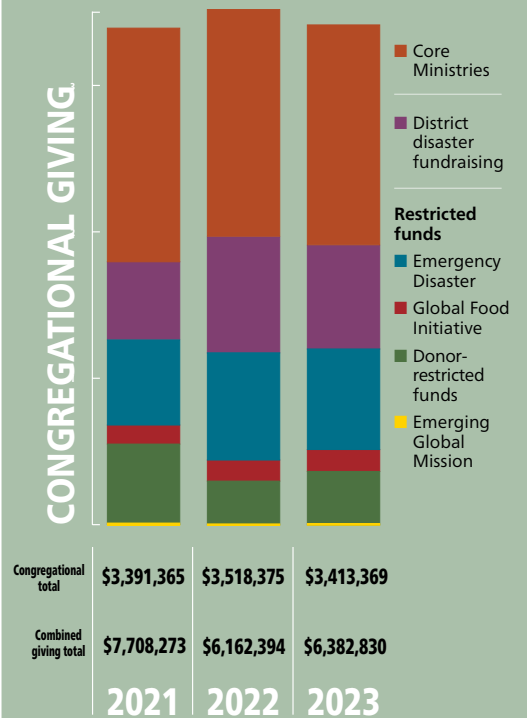



Some departments generate income through subscriptions, sales, or fees. The numbers here show net expense. Internal transfers between ministries have been included.

### INDIVIDUAL GIVING



### CONGREGATIONAL GIVING



But the challenge is the declining level of funds (either unrestricted or designated) to sustain the church's programs and ministries. The Mission and Ministry Board and its staff are taking on that challenge right now, striving to make the best use of our financial resources. As we do that, we pray that God's work will thrive. 

## General secretary signs global Christian letter

**General secretary David Steele** was one of more than 200 Christian leaders from around the world who signed a public letter in advance of the address to Congress by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on July 24.

“As global Christian leaders committed to peace and justice and the recognition of the image of God in all humanity, we abhor the ongoing violence that has now continued for more than nine months between Hamas and the Israeli military,” the opening paragraph said, in part. “More than 1,100 people were killed by the Hamas

attacks on October 7th, and mass killings by the Israeli military in Gaza have taken more than 39,000 lives. More than two-thirds of Gaza . . . have been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. Not only the livelihoods but even the wherewithal to maintain the most basic subsistence of two million people has been erased. Children are dying of malnutrition, credible reports indicate prisoners are being tortured, and efforts to release the hostages are not being prioritized. These atrocities stain the conscience of all humanity, and in this, we include ourselves as Christian leaders and the global church.”

The letter continued with calls for a permanent ceasefire, return of hostages, release of Palestinian prisoners held without due process, immediate access for humanitarian response in Gaza, an end to arms flows into the conflict zone, and prevention of the spread of violence in the region, among other measures.

It also delineated the threat the conflict poses for continued existence of Christianity in the Holy Land, saying, in part: “We fear the existential threat to the Christian presence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories—the very place where our faith tradition began.”

## Mission and Ministry Board sets 2025 budget parameter

**The Mission and Ministry Board** set the 2025 budget parameter for the Church of the Brethren’s Core Ministries during a pre-Annual Conference meeting in Grand Rapids, Mich., on July 3. Chair Colin Scott led the meeting, assisted by chair-elect Kathy Mack and general secretary David Steele.

The 2025 budget parameter for the Core Ministries was approved at \$5.13 million in income and \$5.66 million in expense. This parameter was recommended by the Executive Committee, with a couple of changes to the original parameter proposed by staff. The revised parameter includes, among other things, an increase in the cost-of-living adjustment for employee salary and benefits from the proposed 1 percent to 2.5 percent, and changing the use of designated funds from \$481,000 to \$0. There is an anticipated 7 percent increase for employee medical insurance. In approving the revised parameter—which is based on 10-year giving trends as well as investment transfers—the board also approved a significant budget deficit of \$529,000, which is to be addressed by the Executive Committee between now and the fall board meeting.

### In other business:

The board received a financial update for current year 2024 from treasurer Ed Woolf.

The Strategic Planning Committee received approval for a recommendation intended to enhance the direct linkage between the four “pillars” of the strategic plan and denominational ministries, through infusing communications with the language of the strategic plan and encouraging more direct advocacy by board members and staff. The four pillars are “Pursue Christ’s call to

discipleship,” “Embody the biblical command to love our neighbors,” “Seek God’s racial justice,” and “Reclaim New Testament models of giving.” The board engaged in an hour of conversation around the goal “Seek God’s racial justice.”

The board called a new Executive Committee for 2024–2025: Michaela Alphonse, Joel Gibbel, and Rosanna Eller McFadden, with chair Colin Scott and chair-elect Kathy Mack.

Lauren Seganos Cohen, Meghan Horne Mauldin, and J. Roger Schrock were recognized for completing their terms on the board.

The board also shared prayer concerns, recognized staff transitions, honored recipients of the Revelation 7:9 Award presented by Intercultural Ministries, and welcomed international guests.



*Intercultural Ministries director Founa Badet (at left) with five of the six recipients of the Revelation 7:9 Award, which was presented during the Mission and Ministry Board meeting: (from left) Gilbert Romero, Matt Guynn, Duane Grady, Joshua Brockway, and Michaela Alphonse. Not pictured: Joe Vecchio.*

Chris Burnham/CofB

## Bethany Seminary celebrates the class of 2024

### **B**ethany Theological Seminary celebrated commencement in

Richmond, Ind., on May 11, awarding 11 master's degrees and 17 postgraduate diplomas and certificates. The ceremony took place in Nicarry Chapel with speaker Micah McCreary, president of New Brunswick (N.J.) Theological Seminary.

This year, Bethany held its first-ever commencement in Nigeria, at the seminary's center in the city of Jos on May 21.

Receiving a master of divinity: Stephen Flores, Jason Haldeman, and Jason Harsh.

Receiving a master of arts: Elena Bohlander.

Receiving a master of arts in Theopoetics and Writing: Eric Bader, Kelley Hudlow, Shana Leck, Sarah Orrell, Alina Skujins, and Jaime Staehle.

Receiving a master of arts in Spiritual and Social Transformation: Clarke Staton.

Graduate certificates also were



awarded: Erin Dalrymple and Anitra Kraus received a certificate of achievement in Theological Studies; James Grossnickle-Batterton, Elena Bohlander, Michelle Grover, Patricia Halbeck, Betty Ann Miskowiec, and Sheila Pick received a certificate in Theopoetics and Theological Imagination; Raymond Rischpater received a certificate in Inter-contextual Biblical Interpretation.

The ceremony in Nigeria honored 21 students who earned the postgraduate diploma in Biblical Peacemaking and 1 who earned a certificate of

achievement in Theological Studies. Leaders from Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) who participated in the ceremony included EYN president Daniel Y.C. Mbaya, who is an adjunct lecturer for Bethany. Representatives of EYN, the Anglican Church, and Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) all brought congratulatory messages. Attending from Bethany were president Jeff Carter, academic dean Steve Schweitzer, and executive director of Student Services Lori Current.

## Short-term disaster rebuilding project set for Kentucky

**B**rethren Disaster Ministries has finalized the location for a short-term rebuilding project this September through November, returning to the Dawson Springs, Ky., area. This is where a previous longterm rebuilding project helped with recovery following tornadoes that hit in 2021.

Housing will resume at the Habitat for Humanity Pennyriple Region Warehouse. The goal will be to complete the homes that Brethren Disaster Ministries started work on but could not complete by the middle of August, when the full project closed.



*Brethren Disaster Ministries volunteers work in Kentucky.*



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## Thank you, camp leaders

Thank you for the article “A Century of Holy Ground” marking 100 years of Brethren camps. I have fond memories of several years of camping at Camp Bethel in Virginia, once as a cabin

## Discussion starters for small groups

■ **Knowing Jesus as he is**, for Harrisburg First, is aided by intentional work on the iconography of the church and the understanding of Jesus. One focus has been the stained-glass windows, but the overall effort is more extensive. What process has helped the conversation be positive and productive? Who has helped them understand the need to pay attention to the ethnicity of Jesus? What have they learned about the “whitening” of Jesus and the harm that has done? The article describes the renovated windows as “beautiful and breathtaking.” How would you describe them?

■ **Welcome and worthy**, the Annual Conference theme, was echoed in several aspects of the gathering. Which Conference activities contributed to the sense of welcome and worthiness for all people? How did the new accessibility efforts contribute, and what financial roadblocks might prevent improved accessibility in coming years? How do moderator Madalyn Metzger’s comments to the delegates (the Potluck on p. 32) express the theme and expand on it?

■ **The last hurrah** for quilting at Annual Conference was announced by the organizers in the AACB. Have you participated in a quilting bee—at Annual Conference or elsewhere? If so, what was it like? How has quilting contributed to the Conference? If your congregation has, or has had, a quilting group, how has that affected your church?

counselor. Each summer was a rewarding experience due to the excellent leadership.

All camp leadership and staff deserve a heartfelt thank you; you have been an inspiration to many children and young people. Often these leaders were pastors giving their vacation to serve the camp.

Our family has three generations of Brethren campers: me at Camp Bethel, my husband at Camp Swatara in Pennsylvania, our daughters at [the former] Camp Woodbrook in Maryland, and granddaughters at Camp Eder in Pennsylvania.

**Jeanne Royal Laudermilch**  
New Oxford, Pa.

## Becoming aware of this history

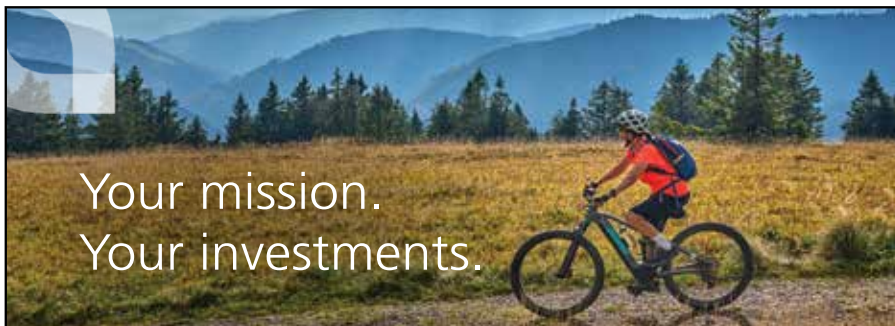
The article by Joshua Brockway, “Seeing Indigenous People,” in the July/August issue is very stirring. I am very grateful for every word, in all its horror and sadness, and all the excellent photos. How

much we all need to repent on behalf of our forebears, and now too, and see all our histories in a deeper light.

The description of the Carlisle Indian School and photos are very vivid. We have a Bruderhof in New South Wales, Australia, and have become very aware of the treatment of the Aboriginal peoples there—so similar to that meted out to the inhabitants around here in New York, and all over.

Our Bruderhof communities near the Hudson River, 80 miles north of New York City, are in a region where 30,000 original peoples once lived. There are amazing stone works on the hills around, showing a very active population achieving great works together. We also find many arrow heads and “atlatls,” a thrown spear that was used for millennia before arrows came in around 700 AD, at least in this area.

On our farm, we have a pond that never dries up with its seven springs, and we find many arrow heads around



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it showing where local tribes lived. One must be aware of all this history as we enjoy this area where some English settlers even asked permission of the English governor to allow them to shoot the local people to obtain their land. This was not granted, but they found other ways to drive out the local inhabitants.

We are grateful for the article telling so much of all that history, which is so important to remember as we take in our nation's background and carry it on our hearts.

**Martin Johnson**  
Maple Ridge Bruderhof  
Ulster Park, NY

## Tiny stories

### The bell tower

The replastered church sanctuary gleams with its new coat of paint after 20-plus years.

"It looks . . . transformed," says one admiring member.

"Yes," the pastor replies, "but now we've discovered we have to do additional work on the bell tower."

There's a moment of silence. Then another asks, "We have a bell tower?"

"We do. It's always been (pointing) up there."

"Why haven't I ever heard it ringing?" asks one beloved nonagenarian.

"Well, the bell tower . . . um . . . has never actually *had* a bell," the pastor explains. "Apparently our bell tower leaks and squeaks, but it does not resound."

After that we decided to put a tiny Christmas bell in the tower so we can say that we officially have a bell tower.

—Carol Davis, Canton, Ill.

## Centenarians

**Daringer**, June, 100, Waterloo, Iowa, June 15

## New members

**Bakersfield**, Calif.: Noah Almeda, Roman Almeda

**Blue Ridge**, Va.: Karen Barger

**Elizabethtown**, Pa.: Raymond O'Boyle, Robin O'Boyle

**Evergreen**, Stanardsville, Va.: Chad Edward Batten, Robert Batten, Lucas Critzer, Trudy Snow Wyant

**First**, Peoria, Ill.: Rick Bean, Elizabeth Ciavarella, Linda Payton

**Hagerstown**, Md.: Jean Bricker, Robert Bricker, David Kirby, Frank Kronawetter, Sharon Kronawetter, Judy Long, Robert Long

**Lancaster**, Pa.: Kathy Clark, Marisor Yolanda Diaz Cruz, April Ditzler, Lilianna Suaza

Gomez, Bob Kettering, Lib Kettering, Barry Plaskon, Thierry Preto, Darlene Ruhl, Dana Statler, Beth Stauffer, David Stauffer, Gia Todaro

**Little Swatara**, Bethel, Pa.: Darrell Younker

**Mechanic Grove**, Quarryville, Pa.: Cassidy Grumbling, Andi Holzhauer, Drew Housekeeper, Kate Price, Kinsey Rhoads

**Mount Olivet**, Broadway, Va.: Leann Lantz, Matthew Lantz, Sarah McKenzie, Weston

McKenzie, Dakota Sheppard, Nathan Turner

**Waynesboro**, Pa.: Debra Slaybaugh

## Wedding anniversaries

**Colwell**, H. C. and Linda, South Bend, Ind., 55

**Doss**, Arlen and Emma S., Bassett, Va., 60

**Graver**, Carl and Doris, Holtwood, Pa., 66

**Houser**, Keim and Sylvia, South Bend, Ind., 60

**Lohr**, Jimmy and Loretta, Easton, Md., 65

**Peffley**, Joe and Judi, Lancaster, Pa., 55

**Pfaltzgraff**, Roy, Jr. and Kathryn C., Haxtun, Colo., 60

**Schopf**, Ed and Annette, Mountville, Pa., 65

**Spangler**, Wayne and Carol, Bridgewater, Va., 70

**Stauffer**, David and Beth, Lititz, Pa., 50

## Deaths

**Barber**, Lily Mae Dean Fleming, 94, Keyser, W.Va., May 1

**Behler**, Aida Frantz, 62, Deer Lake, Pa., May 16

**Belton**, Maxine, 93, Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, Jan. 5

**Bentzel**, Beth Marie, 68, Lancaster, Pa., May 27

**Bishop**, Wayne Wilson, 82, Altadena, Calif., April 30

**Boyd**, Mary Simpson, 90,

Thaxton, Va., March 18

**Brewer**, Solen "Jack" Dewitt, Jr., 78, Westover, Md., April 7

**Chadwick**, Waverly V. Jackson, 88, Harrisburg, Pa., May 21

**Cline**, Arabella Zemenia Sumner, 92, Staunton, Va., June 21

**Cupp**, Charles Sherman, 90, Greenville, Ohio, June 27

**Dick**, Gary L., 78, Gettysburg, Pa., Feb. 10

**Evans**, David L., 71, Lancaster, Pa., May 17

**Eyer**, E. Laverne, 93, Lititz, Pa., June 25

**Fisher**, Helen Fay Hissong, 100, Haverhill, Mass., May 5

**Grant**, Sarah Jane, 88, Dayton, Ohio, May 18

**Groves**, Stanley Smith, 95, Kingsville, Md., May 19

**Hawkinson**, John Travis, 44, Arkansas City, Kan., April 11

**Hoch**, Arthur Andrew, 82, McPherson, Kan., March 27

**Houser**, Gerald A., 84, Myerstown, Pa., June 2

**Huber**, Dorothy May Carpenter, 103, Goshen, Ind., June 2

**Hunt**, Roy, 80, McPherson, Kan., July 31, 2023

**Jacobs**, Elizabeth Hart, 70, Lancaster, Pa., May 4

**Kauffman**, Robert L., Jr., 81, Quarryville, Pa., June 19

**Manges**, John Alvin, 68, Oxford, Pa., May 7

**Manges**, John W., Jr., 88, Johnstown, Pa., May 2

**Matthews**, Donald D., 91, Oakland, Md., June 27

**Miller**, Celia Aurelia Mullenax,

83, Franklin, W.Va., Feb. 21

**Morrison**, Donald G., 84, Plymouth, Ind., June 6

**Moyers**, Clarence Marshall, 95, Harrisonburg, Va., July 1

**Mummau**, Kathryn E. Kreider, 85, Lancaster, Pa., June 14

**Neuwirth**, Richard Kothe, 82, Defiance, Ohio, June 12

**Petry**, Alice Bailey, 87, Lakemore, Ohio, March 2

**Rickerds**, Dolores Lorraine Deener, 90, Pleasant Valley, Md., May 9

**Roller**, Goldie Louise Shull, 94, Dixon, Ill., July 10

**Shultz**, Glenn A., 89, Lititz, Pa., May 4

**Sloan**, Rosemary Lillian McClain, 97, Dixon, Ill., June 9

**Stern**, Donald L., 99, Olympia, Wash., June 26

**Stoops**, Larry W. 78, Chambersburg, Pa., June 11

**Strycker**, Galen "Brad," 92, Goshen, Ind., June 25

**Swihart**, Ellen Marie Russell, 92, Goshen, Ind., Dec. 24

**Ulm**, David, 67, Woodbury, Pa., July 7

**Wagner-McNabb**, Brenda Martin, 55, Gettysburg, Pa., March 13

**Wenger**, Elizabeth Alice Warren, 69, Goshen, Ind., May 15

**Wilson**, Katherine Louise Gaff, 81, Middlebury, Ind., July 11

**Yager**, Hilda Marie Fox, 81, Luray, Va., May 18

**Young**, Glenn Alonzo, Jr., 77, Williamsport, Md., June 25

**Young**, Patricia Ann Smith, 84, Hagerstown, Md., June 4

June 8

**Coughenour**, Kaitlyn, W. Pa. Dist. (Hostetler, Meyersdale, Pa.), May 19

**Navarrete**, Fernanda, Pac. S. W. Dist. (Conexión Pasadena, Calif.), May 4

**Plaza**, Juan Pablo, Pac. S. W. Dist. (Conexión Pasadena, Calif.), May 4

## Commissioned

**Green**, Allan, Mid-Atl. Dist. (Allensville, Hedgesville, W. Va.), May 26

## Licensed

**Clary**, Erika, Mid-Atl. Dist. (Brownsville, Knoxville, Md.), June 30

**Habecker**, Nicolette, Atl. N. E. Dist. (Cornerstone, Lebanon, Pa.), June 2

**Ortiz**, Zaida, Atl. N. E. Dist. (Alpha & Omega, Lancaster, Pa.), May 26

## Placements

**Bear**, Charlotte, pastor, Woodbridge, Va., May 1

**Lancaster**, Mark, from pastor, Good Shepherd, Tipp City, Ohio, to pastor, Trotwood, Ohio, June 17

**Rogers**, Sandi, from interim pastor, Woodbridge, Va., to interim pastor, Grossnickle, Myersville, Md., May 1

**Schuler**, Cynthia, interim pastor, East Cocalico, Stevens, Pa., June 1

**Tindall**, Josh, from interim pastor to pastor, Wyomissing, Pa., May 19

# TURNINGPOINTS

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 and less than one year old to be published.

# A group activity

**A**nnual Conference is foundational to the life of the Church of the Brethren. It's an opportunity for us to come together ... to strengthen and equip the denomination, our congregations, and ourselves to follow Christ.

In support of this foundation, every congregation is asked to send delegates to Annual Conference, as a representative of their local faith family in the life of the larger denomination. That's what's brought many of you here, and I'm so grateful for that.



MADALYN METZGER

As we look at the faces around our tables and in this hall, we also notice those faces that aren't here—of friends and fellow Brethren who have made difficult decisions to leave the Church of the Brethren, over theological disagreements about biblical authority and the fundamentals of Christian living.

These differences—and the tensions around them—have beleaguered us for generations and, for some, culminated in decisions to leave our denomination, which I know has caused a lot of pain and grief.

It would be easier if the people involved weren't people we know, or love, or have relationships with, right? But, sadly, that's not the case. Those who have left, whether it was years ago or more recently, represent the real loss of friends and family with whom we were committed to walking alongside.

And when people who have walked their faith journeys together separate, there's a flood of emotions to wade through, including grief ... resentment ... disillusionment ... and maybe even a little pride. It can lead to feelings of spiritual homelessness, and fears that we are moving further away from Christ's desire for his disciples to be united in love.

The pain is real. We need to recognize that, in order to work through it. But at the same time, I also encourage us to remember that unity of the body of Christ does not mean homogeneity of the body of Christ.

In her book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, Rachel Held Evans wrote that Christianity can't be an individual endeavor. Following


Christ is a group activity—and one that, simultaneously, has been messy and incarnate since the beginning. Because, as she writes, “The church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center.”

It's easy for us to focus on the differences in front of us. But struggles over differences and divisions are not new. In fact, the apostle Paul's letters to the Romans and the Corinthians and other parts of the early church show us that Christians have wrestled with conflict for over two millennia. Yet, God's Spirit continued to work through this increasingly diverse group of Christ-followers, just as the Spirit is working in us today.

Paul reminds us that there is space for difference. There is space for variety, because it is God who gifted us with our unique perspectives and gifts. So we need to not only accept, but *celebrate*, our differences. Our unity in Christ needs diversity within it, so that we can function fully as the body of Christ.

Each person here has distinctive thoughts and opinions, perspectives and gifts, and each of them represents congregations made up of others who also have their own perspectives and gifts. But I invite you to remember, as well, that each person here is a distinct part of the body, committed to Christ—and committed, individually and voluntarily, to one another.

In her book *This Here Flesh*, liturgist, author, and poet Cole Arthur Riley talks about community as “mutuality, the truth that says, We don't just welcome you or accept you; we need you. We are insufficient without you. . . . In mutuality, belonging is both a gift received and a gift given. There is comfort in being welcomed, but there is dignity in knowing that your arrival just shifted a group toward deeper wholeness.”

Your arrival here—each of you—has brought this body toward deeper wholeness. Thank you for being here. Thank you for being part of this diverse and holy community. And thank you for serving God and the church and each other. 

Madalyn Metzger was moderator of the 2024 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference. She opened the first business session with these remarks to delegates.

“Our unity in Christ needs diversity within it, so that we can function fully as the body of Christ.”



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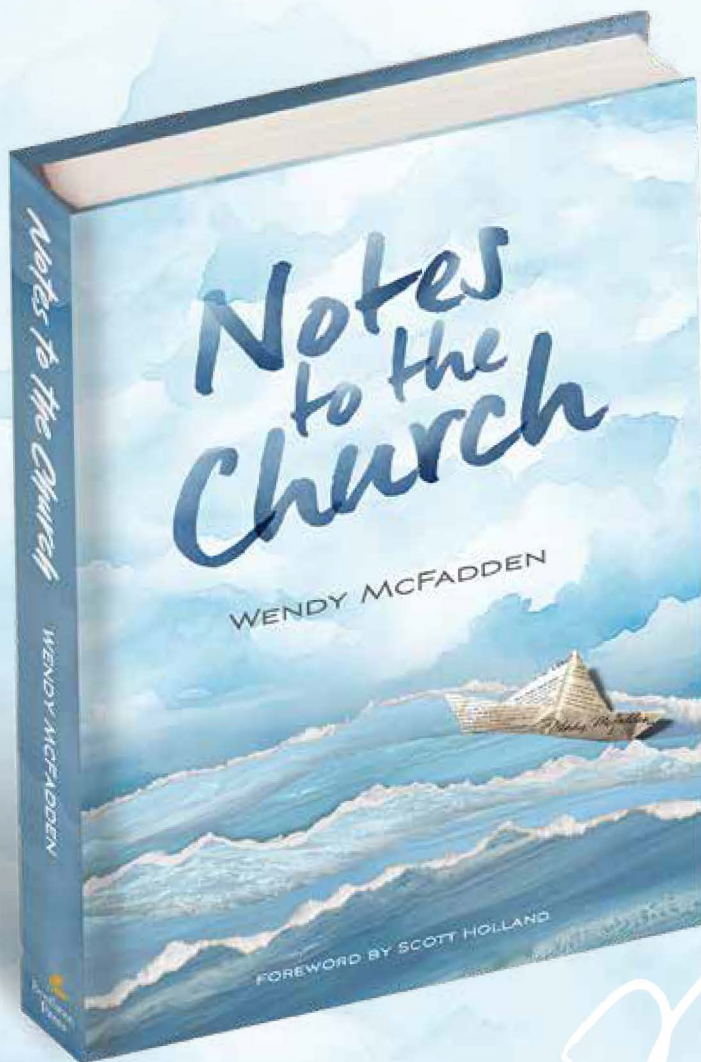
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