



Reflections on a study of denominational leadership

Assimilation as the single requirement

by Eric Bishop

I was finishing my term on the Bethany Seminary board at Annual Conference in 2023 when I was elected to the Calling Denominational Leadership study committee. It was a unique opportunity, and I believed I had unique perspectives. I have been called and elected to congregational, district, and denominational leadership positions. I have nominated people for various leadership positions, sometimes

successfully and sometimes not.

Two things stand out to me about that process in 2023:

First, I wanted to serve, and because of my experience I thought I could add value and useful perspectives. When I was on the Bethany Seminary board we had mixed experiences with the process of calling people to the board, sometimes being successful and other times being overruled by Nominating

Recommendations adopted by the 2025 Annual Conference

1. The denomination should reduce or eliminate the required minimum number of nominations received by the Nominating Committee to report to the Standing Committee. Where at least two qualified and eligible nominations are received, the Nominating Committee should not be required to solicit more nominees.

2. The study committee recommends that the following changes in polity be referred to the Review and Evaluation Committee for further consideration of the impacts and consequences:

- a.** Moving to a slate of nominees;
- b.** Allowing self-nominations;
- c.** Revising eligibility and disqualification rules for elected positions, such as the exclusion of agency board members or staff.

3. The denomination should reaffirm its commitment to cultivating a diverse body of church leaders to maintain consistency with the 2007 Annual Conference Statement, “Separate No More: Becoming a Multi-Ethnic Church,” and the 1991 Annual Conference report from the “Committee on Brethren and

Black Americans.” The denomination should make efforts to welcome and encourage, in a spirit of gratitude, the contributions of all who are willing to accept the call to serve and make a living sacrifice of themselves and their gifts to the body of Christ, without regard to identity, including age, race, sexual orientation, and gender. In these efforts, the denomination should engage with professional consultants with expertise in cultivating diverse leadership.

4. For future continuity within the denomination, the study committee

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Keith Holmberg

Committee, Standing Committee, and the Conference delegates. My professional background makes me work in interpreting policy, which I enjoy on a regular basis, but church polity is something I am still trying to understand and learn.

Second, as soon as it was announced that I was elected, a woman I did not know came up to congratulate me. She then proceeded to ask me not to forget the conservative voice in our process. The exchange stands out to me because it was more of a plea than an ask. She seemed somewhat fearful that she was going to be excluded from the process. I held her voice in my head throughout our study committee's work, and I think it shaped our committee's intentional reaching to all aspects and perspectives of the denomination.

Our current calling, nomination, and election process works just fine for some and is not working at all for others. What is most evident coming out of the 2025 Annual Conference is the fear of a lack of control that seems to sit with many of the delegates. I come away from this study committee experience with a sense of irony that many congregations and districts have the same challenges as the denomination in calling leadership, and many have moved away from a multi-person nominated ballot to a slate of those willing to serve, but they cannot see that as a possibility for calling Annual Conference leadership.

As a church, we are holding on too tightly to our own perspectives and our fears that those with differing perspectives

will overtake us. I sometimes think that we talk about moving with the Holy Spirit, but we are only willing to do so when we believe the Spirit agrees with us.

One of the areas of our church culture most threatened by changing the way we call leadership is the “Brethren name game.” In order to trust someone on the ballot, we have to know them, or their family, or be able to connect their name to someone we know, or a family we know. As a first-generation Brethren, I do not fit in the name game well, though my daughter is getting a taste of it as people connect her to me.

I have believed for some time that assimilation as the single requirement for expanding new membership is our challenge for growth. We want people to join our church, but only if they sing the way we do, are comfortable worshiping the way we always have, and do not try and infuse too much of who they are and the gifts they bring into our worship spaces. After serving on this study committee, I believe the same is true of how we call leadership. We only trust what we know and those with whom we are comfortable. To be called to leadership in our church is less about what you know and what talents you bring and can offer, and more about who you know when the call is made.

On the one hand, we discourage people from nominating themselves for leadership, because it displays vanity. On the other hand, what efforts do we really make to learn about the gifts that people have and bring? If I don't want you to tell me

recommends that for callings to leadership bodies with at least three members, the denomination designate at least one seat as a youth or young adult seat to be occupied by a member of the Church under the age of 35.

5. To assist the denomination in improving the calls for leaders with nontraditional qualifications and experiences, the denomination should clarify in its position descriptions which positions are best suited for nominees who may lack prior denominational leadership experience. The denomination

should revise the categories of information provided on the ballot regarding biographical information and experience to create space for nontraditional skills and experiences.

6. The denomination should publish and publicize expected commitments for positions, including the amount of time, travel, the responsibility of costs, etc., required for each position elected at Annual Conference.

7. The denomination should, in consultation with professionals, introduce

measures to reduce implicit bias in any biographical information presented to delegates.

8. The denomination should implement ways to show greater gratitude and care for those who were willing to accept a call to lead but were not ultimately chosen to serve in that capacity. Such efforts may include increasing transparency about why candidates were not chosen by the Nominating Committee or Standing Committee to move forward, and giving priority consideration to unsuccessful candidates in future nominations.

who you are and what you know, and I am not willing to seek out who you are and learn what you know, then we will be right back in the same place in 10 or 20 years—asking again to study why we have issues calling leadership, as we did in 2001.

Unfortunately, the single most defining characteristic for church leadership these days has little to do with experience or background. It is about a person's theological perspective on a single item. We have become single-issue voters in the church. That is why the system is broken. We care less about how the person will help or lead the church, than we do about what they believe.

It may be that our study committee overwhelmed the delegates with eight recommendations, but I believe we took our calling and charge seriously. We recognized that change, in this case, has to be intentional and come in bite-sized portions.

I come away from this experience hoping that we in the church will be better about listening to the Holy Spirit, seeking out gifts and talents, and trusting our faith when we call our leadership. ❏

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Deeper work will have to happen

by Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred

Is Brethren leadership an oxymoron?" At the 2025 Annual Conference, Jeff Carter, president of Bethany Seminary, posed that provocative question to roughly 100 attendees of an equipping session titled "The Question of Leadership: Why It Matters." As the ensuing discussion revealed, many in that room sensed an oxymoron: Brethren are sometimes shy about leading (which can entail rocking boats and ruffling feathers) and may be more keen on managing (which more often involves tending relationships and solving problems).

Carter discussed three "keys" of leadership that even the meekest of Brethren—and maybe especially the meekest—should be able to summon within themselves:

- Emotional intelligence, which involves self-awareness, discipline, motivation, and empathy;
- Curiosity, or the willingness to "ask the second question" that will pierce the surface level and get to a deeper truth between people or behind conflict; and

■ Understanding of and attention to group dynamics—that is, being aware, in a given situation, of yours and others' positions. This may include, for example, the title you hold; your role and how you relate to or function within the broader group; your responsibilities, or the powers and obligations you have within that group; and your person, or what you bring to the table in terms of background, personality, skills, and so on.

The ethos of leadership might seem unbecoming to many Brethren, particularly given our cultural assumptions that tend to associate leadership with bombast, hunger for power, and dominance. But practices and qualities of true leadership leave room for the more prototypically Brethren attributes of service-mindedness, peace-making, and humility. When you put it that way, leading doesn't sound so bad, or so un-Brethren.

I have spent the last two years thinking about and studying leadership in the Church of the Brethren as part of the Calling Denominational

Leadership study committee, which was created in 2023 to review the denomination's practices for calling leaders at Annual Conference. My colleagues, Eric Bishop and Erika Clary, and I had a daunting task: As membership in the denomination declines, so has it become more challenging to identify a diverse and capable cohort of people who are willing to take on volunteer leadership positions that can often resemble unpaid part- or full-time jobs.

Or so it has seemed. While our two years of study reinforced our understanding that the denomination has challenges ahead, we also found reasons for encouragement: there is an untapped pool of people who are eager and willing to serve, if only the rest of us have the vision to see and call them. We found, for instance, that our calling process appears to overemphasize traditional leadership credentials like past leadership experience. True enough, we should probably hesitate to call an Annual Conference moderator who hasn't



even served as an Annual Conference delegate. But we can place too much of a premium on what may appear on a leader's résumé, and not enough on attributes like enthusiasm for church service, reliability, creativity, and faithfulness. This is particularly true for roles where a little bit of inexperience—and the willingness to try new things that comes with it—isn't necessarily a bad thing.

We also found, as did the Standing with People of Color Committee that also presented its final report at this year's Annual Conference, that the denomination has far to go in terms of calling and truly embracing diverse leadership. This was one of the more disheartening aspects of my experience on the study committee.

We heard from many Brethren during the study, and we asked many for their ideas on how to achieve greater diversity in church leadership. Unfortunately, one of the most common responses we received was resistance to the idea that the church even needs diverse leadership. Many responded that we shouldn't focus on diversity, but qualifications. Tellingly, while we asked many questions about how to rethink the leadership calling process, it was only when we asked about diversity that this concern about qualifications suddenly popped up.

This knee-jerk reaction that assumes that calling diverse leaders is somehow at odds with calling well-qualified leaders cries out for deep, prayerful examination as a church. We frequently espouse a desire to be a

diverse, multicultural church, in the mold of Revelations 7:9. Yet how are we to achieve authentic, deep-rooted multiculturalism if diversity is welcomed in church pews but questioned on church boards?

Equally disheartening was hearing from people who felt wounded by the calling process, to the point that they no longer wished to participate. Many felt the sting of rejection, either because they had been nominated but were not selected for the ballot, or they made it onto the ballot but then experienced an even more public rejection when they were not elected. It can hurt to make yourself vulnerable enough to accept a calling to serve, only to not be chosen. As we noted in our study, the church can do a better job at expressing gratitude and care for those who are willing to serve but not ultimately chosen.

We also heard from several people whose leadership gifts were actively discouraged or belittled because they were members of the LGBTQ+ community. If the church truly wants to do better at calling leaders, it would do well not to alienate them.

Our committee made several recommendations, which the delegate body accepted with one minor (and wise) modification. I hope the adoption of these recommendations helps. But the deeper work will have to happen at the personal and congregational level. Most importantly, Brethren need to take an active hand in the calling and gifts-discernment process.

Just like Brethren have a shyness

about leading, we also seem to have a suspicion of others leading. Again, when our cultural models of leadership often carry weapons or hoard power and wealth, that's not necessarily an unhealthy suspicion. Carter's keys of leadership—emotional intelligence, curiosity, and interpersonal awareness—can be just as helpful for identifying and fostering positive leadership qualities in others as it can be in cultivating leadership traits in ourselves.

Pause and think about a person at church you know to be empathetic, inquisitive, and relational. Then consider nominating that person for a position on next year's Annual Conference ballot at www.brethren.org/ac/nominations. But don't stop there: there are many opportunities to serve and lead beyond those that appear on the Annual Conference ballot. At the very least, let that person know that you see, support, and value the leadership qualities that God created within them.

In a sense, calling one another into leadership is (how is this for an oxymoron?) an act of collective leadership. We lead, and we allow ourselves to be led. Both take grace, humility, and wisdom, but each of us has the ability to call and be called. Brethren leadership, it turns out, is not oxymoronic. It's all around us.

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Keith Holmberg

On calling out gifts, trust, and transparency

by Erika Clary

One of my favorite scripture texts is the narrative of Mary visiting Elizabeth in the first chapter of Luke. After Mary discovers she is pregnant with Jesus, she makes the long journey to visit Elizabeth, who has also been told she is miraculously pregnant. Upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth's baby (John the Baptist) leaps in Elizabeth's womb and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth then expresses what has just happened to her and ensures Mary knows she is blessed among women.

While I love this exchange in general because of the unusual circumstances of Mary as a pregnant virgin and Elizabeth as a pregnant elderly woman previously believed to be barren, I appreciate the scripture even more when I consider it from a leadership perspective.

Since Mary was young and not yet married to Joseph, she likely was terrified about how people would react to her news. Though she was devoted to God and obviously chosen by God, she may have felt unqualified to complete this monumental and miraculous task. Thankfully, she had Elizabeth, who believed in Mary and was not afraid to

make Mary's gifts and status known.

One of the prominent lessons I learned while serving on the Calling Denominational Leadership study committee is that we all need an Elizabeth—someone who will name our gifts, even when we do not see them ourselves, and despite any reasons we think people will not take us seriously.

We also must be Elizabeths for those around us.

Other than naming the gifts of those around us, we can be like Elizabeth also by calling leadership out of our denomination through trust and transparency. It seems to be human nature to select individuals who are most like us for leadership positions. This makes sense, because we want someone we can look up to and someone in whom we can see ourselves. What if we expand our thinking to also learn from those who are different from us? What if we take seriously and trust people who are willing to serve in leadership, even if they do not look like us or worship in different ways than we do?

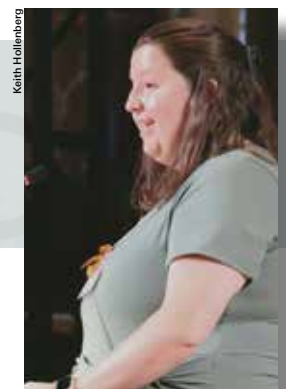
We also must learn to trust that even young people and those without a lot of church leadership experience can be leaders. Last May, our study

committee held a conversation with a group of young adults, ages 18 to 35, during Young Adult Conference. We heard a tremendous amount of frustration about young adults either being nominated but not selected because they “don't have enough experience,” or not being taken seriously, or not being nominated in the first place.

Many of these young adults mentioned that they hear people in their congregations and the denomination express interest in young adult involvement and leadership, but those thoughts seem to be forgotten when nominations are made. We cannot say we want more young adults in leadership without actually providing those opportunities. Many young adults are willing and eager to serve, despite their busy schedules, and we must trust that they are capable.

Additionally, there are many members of the denomination who could serve in various leadership positions but do not even try because they feel underqualified due to a lack of experience. While church leadership experience may often be important, it does not need to be the main qualification for every position. Sometimes, especially if we want a

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Keith Hollenberg



more diverse leadership body, it actually may be worthwhile to consider other qualifications such as personality, gifts, talents, and enthusiasm. In many leadership positions, it is possible for a person to learn as they go. This is not always the case, but it can be true. Once again, we must trust that those who have unique qualifications or skills we do not consider right away can learn the duties of a position and do a good job at it.


It is because of our conversations with young adults, among other discussions across the denomination and survey feedback, that our committee recommended that a seat be set aside for a young person in leadership bodies of three or more people. We also recommended that better information about necessary qualifications for leadership positions be shared in order to create space for nontraditional skills and experience.

Another important lesson from my experience on this study committee was the necessity of transparency. People often decline nominations because they feel they do not have all the details about the position. For example, how long is the term? Are there any expenses involved? How much time will I need to dedicate to this position each week? How much time will I have to spend away from home? Is most of the work completed in person or online? These are imperative questions for the denomination to answer to the best of its ability. When we are clear about these things with the people we want to nominate, they may be more willing to serve. At present, not all of these details are transparent to those who have questions about what the job entails, though there have been some strides in the right direction.

There is so much more I could write about what I learned during my

time on this study committee. I am grateful to have been nominated and elected by the delegate body in 2023. As I ponder the future of leadership in our denomination, I hope that we can all be like Elizabeth and call out the gifts of those around us—and nominate them! I hope we can learn to trust people with fresh ideas that are out of the

box. I hope the denomination will continue to work toward full transparency in its job descriptions.

Most of all, I hope to see an increase in accepted nominations because the people who are asked feel trusted to lead and qualified to do so. 

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