




CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# MESSENGER

MAY 2026 [WWW.BRETHREN.ORG](http://WWW.BRETHREN.ORG)



WHEN  
THE CHURCH  
BEGINS TO  
**HOPE**



CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# MESSENGER

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# Fast typing

**A**fter six weeks of a summer typing class in ninth grade (I was a natural, it turned out), I wrote all my school papers on my mother's old Royal manual typewriter. By senior year, I had a part-time job as a typist at a large company in town.

Almost everything I've ever written was done on a keyboard—first the manual typewriter, then the electric Adler that was a high school graduation gift, the IBM Selectric with the clever snap-in ball that allowed you to change the typeface, the clunky CPT word-processing machine with a plastic hood to muffle the sound, and finally the computer. My brain thinks best when connected to a keyboard.



WENDY MCFADDEN  
PUBLISHER

MESSENGER magazine was the first department at the Church of the Brethren denominational offices to buy a desktop computer. While the organization had a mainframe, this was the first computer that sat on a desk. At the time, even the publishing house wasn't ready to take the plunge.

That desktop publishing system back in 1989 consisted of one powerhouse computer and four regular ones, extra-large monitor that could display a two-page magazine spread, flatbed scanner, laser printer, PageMaker software, Windows 2.1, and a word processing system (I still miss the old WordPerfect software).

These elements and all the peripherals cost a lot of money, but they totaled about what we were spending in one year on typesetting and paste-up.

On the tail end of this big purchase, MESSENGER also bought an NEC UltraLite laptop computer. It came with a husky 2 megabytes of storage memory, which cost \$490 more than the version with 1 megabyte. (Today my home laptop has 8,000 times more memory.)

On some keyboards you can tell which letters are used most often. Those keys might be extra shiny, or they might be so worn that the letters are rubbed off. The keys tell you something, but nothing meaningful, actually.

Somehow, though, those hardworking keys are a medium through which the words are launched into publication.

"Writing is fast typing," wrote Catholic essayist, novelist, and editor Brian Doyle in *The American Scholar*. (He was explaining how to become a writer.)

For 37 years, MESSENGER staff have been typing fast on computers. Before that, we were typing fast on typewriters. And before that—well, I don't exactly know, but I think it was slow.

*Wendy McFadden*



**“Love and truth form a good leader; sound leadership is founded on loving integrity.”** —Proverbs 20:28, *The Message*

**“Most of us don’t really like the arrival of change no matter what we might say in theory about its goodness or necessity. Change is hard.”** —social worker Sharyn Pinney

**“The secret of leadership is a robust intimacy with God.”**  
—Lewis A. Parks and Bruce C. Birch in *Ducking Spears, Dancing Madly: A Biblical Model of Church Leadership*

**“E-mail is not a conflict resolution tool.”**  
—Methodist mediator Susan Nienaber

**“The more churches lose our ability to barricade ourselves off from one another, the more God’s grace flows through us into the world.”** —Kenda Creasy Dean in *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*

**“Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.”** —Pope Benedict XVI

**THIS YEAR IN HISTORY**

**One hundred fifty-five years ago**, in 1871, Annual Meeting formally accepted “German Baptist Brethren” as the official name of the denomination. Some congregations had already begun using the name several decades before. The name changed to “Church of the Brethren” in 1908.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

**John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed**, is buried in Fort Wayne, Ind. His gravesite is in Johnny Appleseed Park just behind the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum. Chapman, who died in 1845, was originally from Massachusetts, but he traveled the Midwest on his mission of tree planting and preaching. The city’s minor league baseball team, the Fort Wayne TinCaps, is named in his honor. His gravestone bears a fitting epitaph: “He lived for others.”



**HIDDEN HOOSIERS**

**Can you find these Indiana locations** that have hosted (or will soon host) Annual Conference/Annual Meeting in the puzzle below? Answers can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, forward or backward.

FORT WAYNE	H	O	N	G	R	A	N	E	B	P	E
INDIANAPOLIS	E	T	O	A	P	P	I	D	O	A	D
NORTH MANCHESTER	N	H	R	S	T	C	L	W	N	T	R
ANDERSON	Y	E	T	I	N	R	E	M	E	A	K
WINONA LAKE	A	A	H	U	E	I	A	L	L	N	I
MUNCIE	W	T	M	R	R	N	Y	H	O	I	S
KOSCIUSKO (COUNTY)	T	I	A	Z	E	D	S	B	K	C	E
ELKHART (COUNTY)	R	S	N	O	T	I	E	A	S	L	K
WAYNE (COUNTY)	O	T	C	O	W	A	E	D	U	S	E
CARROLL (COUNTY)	F	J	H	L	N	N	A	T	I	N	Y
	B	O	E	N	Y	A	W	L	C	C	A
	E	S	S	Y	H	P	L	G	S	S	P
	A	C	T	E	P	O	A	A	O	C	E
	L	O	E	T	R	L	G	S	K	I	C
	I	N	R	R	H	I	A	P	E	E	R
	N	H	A	N	O	S	R	E	D	N	A
	C	C	E	I	G	O	L	N	S	H	I



**BY THE NUMBERS**

**23**

**Number of times** the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference/Annual Meeting has been held in Indiana prior to this year. This summer’s Conference in Fort Wayne (June 28–July 2) will be the first in the Hoosier State since 1993.



# National Youth Conference

YMCA of the Rockies • July 18-23, 2026



register at  
[www.brethren.org/nyc/registration](http://www.brethren.org/nyc/registration)

## Recreation

The YMCA of the Rockies offers so many exciting opportunities for recreation! At no extra cost,

check out pickleball equipment, basketballs, volleyballs, and frisbees, swim in the indoor pool, hike on a trail right into Rocky Mountain National Park, play gaga ball, use foosball and pool tables, and so much more.

Other exciting activities, including horseback riding, axe throwing, an aerial challenge course, and a climbing wall, all come with an extra fee. Be sure to check out the Recreation page on the NYC website for info on how to reserve the activities that cost a little extra. Stay tuned for more information soon!



## Service Project

Our service project will be making Fleece Tie Blankets!



NYC will be partnering with Fleece and Thank You, a nonprofit that supplies the blankets for us to cut and tie and then helps to distribute them to hospitals across the United States to bring extra comfort to children in the hospital.



For more information go to [www.brethren.org/nyc](http://www.brethren.org/nyc) or email [cobyouth@brethren.org](mailto:cobyouth@brethren.org)



@brethrenyouth



Church of the Brethren Youth and Young Adults OR National Youth Conference

National Youth Conference (NYC) provides young people in high school and the first year of college (or are age equivalent) and their advisors the chance to gather for a week of fellowship, worship, workshops, recreation and more!

## Open Circle continues support to immigrants

**F**ear and mistrust continue in Minneapolis, reports Open Circle Church of the Brethren in Burnsville, Minn. Even though the federal government has said it is ending Operation Metro Surge, people at the church and others in Minnesota are skeptical that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will be leaving them alone.

Many immigrants, including those with legal status and citizenship, stopped going to work and leaving their homes to buy food because they feared for their lives. Eviction notices in the community have skyrocketed.

In response, Open Circle has received donations for community support efforts, and the church's organizing team is distributing funds for food, essentials, rent, and bill support.

And when the Spanish-speaking congregation that rents space from Open Circle notified them that they would not be meeting for an undetermined period because their members feared for their safety, the organizing team decided to grant a reprieve of several months' rent.

It feels like a dark time for society, members say, but it is not without light. The congregation's Feb. 15 worship service began with these words:

"We meet today during challenging times. Here in Minnesota, we have seen the strain of policies and enforcement that unsettle our communities. Across the country, we see power used in ways that deepen fear rather than ease it. And around the world, war continues to threaten the land itself—forests, rivers, creatures, and the people who depend on them.

"And yet, even in the midst of all this, something else is happening too. People are supporting each other quietly and consistently. Neighbors are showing up with food, rides, advocacy, presence. Communities are refusing to let cruelty define who we are. There is a kind of hope that grows not from ignoring the world's pain, but from tending to each other within it."

—Janet Westenberg



## FaithX takes older adults to Florida

**T**he older adult FaithX trip Feb. 22-27 took 14 participants and leaders Marissa Witkovsky-Eldred and Aly Heckeroth of the FaithX and Brethren Volunteer Service staff to Camp Ithiel in Gotha, Fla. Participants worked on a number of service projects, but also had plenty of fun.

Service projects included repainting the dining hall, sanding the chapel door, replacing the floor of the barn, starting prep work for replacing the back wall of the Pathfinder Cabin, and cleaning the kitchen.

During free time, the group canoed on the camp's lake, visited the Nehrling Gardens, and put together puzzles. For the recreation day at the end of the week, they traveled to Flat Island Preserve and Silver Springs State Park where they took a glass bottomed boat tour. There, they saw a wide variety of plants and animals including manatees that had migrated for the winter.

—Aly Heckeroth

## Peoria's snack packs share love

**E**very month of the school year, First Church of the Brethren in Peoria, Ill., assembles more than 400 snack packs to share with children at Hines Primary School. According to the church newsletter, they provide food to children who may not have access to adequate food "and they show each child that we care for them, and more importantly, so does God."

The Midwest Food Bank, which has accepted Peoria's initiative into its agency program, provides some of the food. The church also donates some food from the Midwest Food Bank directly to the school's food pantry and collects other supplies to donate to the school.

The gatherings where volunteers put together the packs are opportunities to serve others, enjoy fellowship, and pray for the children, their families, and the school staff.

"And as you can see from the children's thank you notes," reported the church newsletter, "the love is reciprocal!" Said a thank you note from Scarlett: "Thanks for your help. Your so kind. Nobody is like you guys, there would'nt be snack packs without you guys. You guys are awesome!"

# Western Plains training braves ice and fire

**Ice and fire.** No, not the epic Game of Thrones saga but the very real elements some endured to gather for the Western Plains District leadership training in Great Bend, Kan.

Some drove through smoke-stained skies, navigating around wildfires sweeping the panhandles of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Others descended from snow-laced mountains in Colorado and New Mexico, leaving behind peaks brushed white with winter's final breath. Still others traced the open plains, guided by long highways and longer prayers, until they arrived at the Heartland Center for Spirituality.

Joshua Brockway, director of discipleship and identity for the Church of the Brethren, led the teaching. He offered guidance at the outset: "Dialogue is not debate. A debate is a contest with a winner and loser. Debaters do not listen to understand, but rather to find flaws in the



*Sticky notes share participants' feelings during the leadership training event.*

other person's arguments." He reminded the group that the early Brethren gathered around scripture with questions about the text and about themselves. Their shared quest to understand and follow Jesus was framed not by winning arguments, but by talking—and listening—together.

Participants were invited to see the

sweeping arc of church history, examine assumptions about Brethren life and thought, wrestle with sobering statistics facing congregations, and sit quietly in spiritual direction. The group asked what it means to be Brethren—Pietist and Anabaptist—in the 21st century. What do we bring to the table? What does faithfulness look like now?

On Friday evening, many gathered around a television to watch the Olympics—diverse opinions and personalities united by a shared excitement. The group cheered as Alysa Liu captured gold. Downstairs, the Dominican sisters hosted a coffeehouse outreach where Brethren shared space and song with the Roman Catholic community, led in worship by an evangelical musician.

Under one roof, different traditions, one Lord. Unity in diversity. Fire and ice. Opposites—yet somehow essential to one another. —Brian Nixon

## In the news

■ **Bethany Seminary president Jeff Carter** on Feb. 3 offered the invocation at the beginning of a session of the Indiana State House of Representatives. The invocation read in part, "We ask your grace upon this House—its members, their staff, those who support the work of this chamber, and their families. For we know the mantle of authority can be heavy for those who serve and the circle that surrounds them. May your grace be known and may we honor the enduring principles of justice, liberty, and the common good to the flourishing of all who call Indiana home."

■ **An update from Brother Alex, pastor of a Brethren congregation in Chernihiv, Ukraine**, was shared by Western Plains District and Quinter (Kan.) Church of the Brethren, after sev-



*An artist's rendering of the gate of the Brethren University in Nigeria.*

eral months of no communication: "The family is ok. They have some intermittent utilities, communication is difficult as internet is spotty, and prayers are appreciated. This is good news and gives reason to celebrate. . . . Please keep Brother Alex, his family, and our brothers and sisters in the church there in your prayers."

■ **EYN has broken ground for a Brethren University in Nigeria** with a foundation-laying ceremony for the

university gate. Daniel Y. C. Mbaya, president of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) emphasized that the university project is firmly rooted in the core values of EYN, inherited from the founding fathers of the church. Those values, he said, include education, healthcare delivery, agricultural development, and the improvement of community livelihoods—all of which remain central to the church's mission and responsibility to society. —Mbursa Jinatu

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.



# Brother Moderator *but I call him Dad*

by Marianne Fitzkee

**B**rother Moderator is just the latest in a long list of names Don Fitzkee has had over the course of his life.

Growing up in Lancaster County, Pa.—about a mile as the crow flies from where he now lives—he was known at Chiques Church of the Brethren as Donny, pronounced “Dunny” in the local Pennsylvania Dutch accent.

After college, his club volleyball friends dubbed him Jakey, a nickname inspired by the “Brethren beard” he grew to resemble the church elders staring out from portraits in the old Zug Library at Elizabethtown College, where he spent hours doing research for a Brethren history book. (The beard is gone now, along with most of the hair on the top of his head.)

Since joining the pastoral staff at Lancaster Church of the Brethren in 2018, he’s been Pastor Don. My brother

and I just call him Dad.

Each name marks a chapter in Don’s faith journey—none of which he could have imagined. “I’ve never been a guy who knows where I’m going and says God wants me to do this, God’s leading me to do that ...but when I look back, I can see how the path made sense,” he muses.

That backward-looking clarity shapes how he understands the present moment. Just as his own past has prepared him to serve as moderator at such a time as this, he believes the Church of the Brethren’s past has prepared us to face our current season of uncertainty and division.

His 2026 Annual Conference theme is simple: *Imagine!*

He hopes it will help Brethren “begin to envision a different kind of church and a different way of relating to each other” by reclaiming traditional themes like radical discipleship, commitment to our New Testament creed, caring community, humble service, and nonviolent peacemaking.

Carolyn, his wife of 37 years, has a more modest hope: that her husband “won’t say anything stupid.”

## Looking backward

God used each twist and turn in Don’s life to develop his gifts for kingdom work.

His early years revolved around school and church. He describes the Chiques Church of the Brethren, where he attended for 55 years, as “a good place to be introduced to and nurtured in faith” of the hands-on variety.

That formation extended beyond Sunday mornings. When he was 16, a church connection led to his first summer job painting for Becker Ginder, a free minister at Chiques who would become a lifelong mentor.

“It was an unusually rich intellectual atmosphere for a paint crew,” Don recalls, full of conversation about faith, life, and the world—along with plenty of wisecracks.



Don Fitzkee with his wife, Carolyn, and children Galen (left) and Marianne (right).

*The moderator brings greetings to the National Older Adult Conference, held last fall.*

One moment, in particular, stuck with him. “We were talking dumb one day and Becker got a philosophical look on his face and said, ‘I wonder Don, if someday you will ever become truly creative and not merely clever;’ and I don’t know if he was still wondering when he died.”

At the time, Don’s literary instincts leaned toward the latter. His early writing found an outlet in the satirical youth group publication, the *Chiques Chatter*.

After graduating as valedictorian of the Manheim Central High School class of 1982, Don continued feeding his intellectual hunger at the nearby Brethren-founded Elizabethtown College.

There, he stumbled into studying sociology and became a research assistant for Don Kraybill, who—alongside Carl Bowman—was doing a comparative study of Brethren, Mennonites, and Amish. The work sparked Don’s lasting interest in Brethren history.

He studied abroad his junior year in Germany, a great place for a Brethren history lover, where he developed the conviction that “it’s important for people to get away. . . . Education does it, but the right kinds of travel also help broaden you and help you see things differently.”

When he returned to Elizabethtown, he met Carolyn in the college concert choir, and they’ve been singing in harmony ever since.

After college, Don moved to the denominational offices in Elgin, Ill., to serve as editorial assistant for *MESSENGER*, serving through Brethren Volunteer Service—a shift as theological as it was geographic. The conservative Chiques congregation viewed Elgin as “the kind of place you need to remember who you are when you go out there.”

However, Don felt at home. “It was during this period,” he posits, “that I learned the church and the church learned to know me.”

He wrote profiles on a general secretary and two Annual Conference moderators, attended board meetings, covered major events like National Youth Conference, and interacted with denominational leaders who affirmed his call to set-apart ministry, echoing Becker’s encouragement from back home. He started taking a few classes at Bethany Seminary.



Every day at lunchtime, he and denominational leaders would play a hybrid four-square dodgeball game “that brought out a violent side in some pacifist Brethren.” He also taught some of their children in the fifth-grade Sunday school class at Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren. Through this type of interaction, he gained what he quips is “the one deep spiritual qualification you need to be able to serve in the larger denomination—name recognition.”

After his BVS term, Don returned to the paint crew, was licensed to ministry in 1989, and joined a team of bivocational ministers at Chiques. He was tapped to write an updated history of the Atlantic Northeast District—the first of several Brethren-related books he would author.

He continued his theological education at Evangelical School of Theology and at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Palmer) in Pennsylvania.

When we kids came along, Don decided it was time to fold up his painter’s pants after 20 years, including seven running the business.

In January 2002 he began at COBYS Family Services, a Brethren-related foster care and adoption agency, with responsibilities in fundraising and communication. He eventually became director of development.

Yet even as his professional life stabilized, Don felt increasingly at odds theologically with other leaders of the Chiques congregation. “That was a hard time,” he says.

“Just as his own past has prepared him to serve as moderator at such a time as this, he believes the Church of the Brethren’s past has prepared us to face our current season of uncertainty and division.”



Even though, or perhaps because, he may have been in line to become the Chiques moderator—the primary pastoral and administrative role in a free ministry church—he made the difficult decision to submit his resignation in 2009 and even considered letting his ordination lapse. He and the rest of the family continued to be active members at Chiques for nine more years.

But stepping back created space for something new.

In the years that followed, Don served as moderator for Stevens Hill Community Church of the Brethren, returned to denominational leadership with a second stint on the Mission and Ministry Board (including two years as chair), and was able to be more present in his kids' lives.

After 16 years at COBYS, he again sensed it was time for change. True to form, he resigned without knowing what would come next. In 2018, he accepted an interim pastorate

at Lancaster Church of the Brethren that ended up being long-term. After concluding his time as Annual Conference moderator this summer, he'll transition from serving part-time to full-time there.

### Imagine!

Don's selection as moderator came through a nomination by fellow Lancaster member and former Annual Conference moderator Guy Wampler. His theme, *Imagine!*, draws from Acts 2:17, where Peter quotes the prophet Joel: "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."

The idea was sparked by reading the late scholar Walter Brueggemann's classic work *The Prophetic Imagination*, which suggests that a prophet's visions and dreams for a hopeful future often reappropriate themes from the past

# Annual Conference preview

by Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

**"Imagine!" (Acts 2:17-18) is the theme** for the 2026 Annual Conference at the Grand Wayne Convention Center in Fort Wayne, Ind., on Sunday, June 28, to Thursday, July 2.

Don Fitzkee will preside as moderator, assisted by moderator-elect Dennis Beckner and secretary David Shumate. The Program and Arrangements Committee also includes Gail Heisel, Laura Sellers, and Amber Harris, with Rhonda Pittman Gingrich as Conference director.

### Ballot

**Amy Gall Ritchie** of Manchester Church of the Brethren, North Manchester, Ind., and **Gilbert Romero Jr.** of Glendora (Calif.) Church of the Brethren head the ballot as candidates for moderator-elect.

Romero is a pastor, music leader, prison chaplain, and a leader in Bittersweet Ministries, and has been Pacific Southwest District Spanish

ministry training coordinator for the Education for Shared Ministry and Seminario Biblico Anabautista Hispano programs.

Gall Ritchie is an associate pastor of Pastoral Care and Faith Formation at the Manchester church and is a spiritual director and founder of Persimmon Studio, previously having served as director of Student Development for Bethany Seminary.

Also on the ballot:

*Program and Arrangements Committee of Annual Conference:*

**Natasha Beaumont** of Mount Wilson Church of the Brethren, Lebanon, Pa.; **Lee-Lani Wright** of Springfield (Ore.) Church of the Brethren.

*Mission and Ministry Board, Area 3:*  
**Veronica Barnes** of Cedar Creek Church of the Brethren, Citronelle, Ala.; **Terri Welch Luzynski** of Montezuma Church of the Brethren, Dayton, Va.

*Mission and Ministry Board, Area 5:*

**Daniel Klayton** of Ellisforde Church of the Brethren, Tonasket, Wash.; **Gretchen Zience** of Seattle (Wash.) Olympic View Community Church of the Brethren.

*Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee:* **Brian Rice** of Lititz (Pa.) Church of the Brethren; **Chad Whitzel** of Easton (Md.) Church of the Brethren.

Complete biographical information is at [www.brethren.org/ac2026/business/ballot](http://www.brethren.org/ac2026/business/ballot).

### Worship services

**Sunday, June 28: Moderator Don Fitzkee**, co-pastor of Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren, speaking on the theme of radical discipleship.

**Monday, June 29: Beth Jarrett**, pastor of Staunton (Va.) Church of the Brethren, speaking on the theme of the New Testament church.

**Tuesday, June 30: James Washington**, pastor at Pleasant View



*Don met Lance the Camel while visiting Mill Creek Church of the Brethren in Port Republic, Va. Lance (short for Lancelot) is cared for by pastor Glenn Bollinger on a neighboring farm (dubbed "Camel-lot") and performs in the congregation's live nativity. Don was hosted by Glenn and Debbie Bollinger during his visit to Shenandoah District conference last fall.*

that are rooted in God's faithfulness.

Don embraces that tension. "I'm trying to have it both ways," he admits. "I want a forward-looking theme, but we have daily themes that our worship services are built around, and most of those are yanked right from the Brethren heritage curriculum."

For him, remembering and imagining are not opposites—they are partners.

He believes the Church of the Brethren still has something vital to offer in today's world. For example, "Who can

look at our world and our culture and say that peace isn't important?" he asks. "I think Brethren have something to say about peace."

His ability to see multiple sides of an issue is, he believes, an asset. "You can hear what these folks are saying and understand how people on the other side are hearing it." But he also recognizes the limits of staying in the middle. "Sometimes one side is clearly right and not taking a side is cowardly. Sometimes we're called to take a side."

The challenge lies in discerning when to hold tension and when to take a stand.

That discernment has become real through his work with refugees. Alongside Carolyn and others at Lancaster, Don has helped welcome 21 refugees from Afghanistan. "It really has kind of radicalized me," he admits. "When we started settling refugees maybe it was a little controversial

Church of the Brethren in Elida, Ohio, and Elm Street Church of the Brethren in Lima, Ohio, speaking on peace.

*Wednesday, July 1: **Becky Zapata**, pastor of Santa Ana (Calif.) Principe de Paz Church of the Brethren, speaking on community.*

*Thursday, July 2: **Caleb Kragt**, part-time pastor at West Charleston Church of the Brethren in Tipp City, Ohio, speaking on service.*

Worship services will be free of charge both in person and online for registered and non-registered attendees.

The worship planning team includes Gail Heisel of the Program and Arrangements Committee, Jim Chinworth, Andy Duffey, Cristal Herrera, and Marty Keeney (music coordinator).

### Special this year

*Attendance for the virtual portions of the Conference are offered at no charge*



thanks to contributions from Living Stream Church of the Brethren and Pacific Northwest District. This gives people who cannot attend in-person the opportunity to engage in business, a number of equipping sessions, and the Wednesday evening concert. Those attending virtually must still register, and are encouraged to make a donation to the ministry of Annual Conference as an expression of appreciation.

*Local Church of the Brethren members and friends in the Fort Wayne area are encouraged to register for at least one day of the Conference. It is unusual for Annual Conference to be*

held in an area where there are several Church of the Brethren congregations and local Brethren are encouraged to take advantage.

*Special activities are planned for the afternoon and evening of Sunday, June 28, starting at 12 noon (Eastern time) when the **exhibit area** opens.*

**Equipping sessions** are scheduled 1-2 p.m. and 2:30-3:30 p.m. on topics including Brethren practices for changing times, building financial sustainability for your church, responding to trauma, ministry training options, how to pay your pastor, and lessons for the church from Bethany Seminary's success. Registrants may



*More than a decade ago, Don preached at Annual Conference about his nearly perfect apple tree that never produced any apples. Some years his other two apple trees do produce fruit, like these Red Delicious specimens at the Manheim Farm Show.*

in our culture, but it wasn't a terribly political thing . . . it was a Christian hospitality thing."

What once felt straightforward has become more contested—and Don believes that the church is called to show hospitality to immigrants and refugees. He has met with elected officials, participated in advocacy efforts, and spoken out more publicly on this issue. He points to the denomination's Deportation Defense Response program as a hopeful example of something good going on in the church.

At the same time, he resists caricaturing those who disagree. His own views have changed over time, and he remains cautious about assuming every change is an improvement.

In workshops he has led on the district conference circuit, Don often shares an illustration of a marital therapist who asks a couple, "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be in relationship?" He sees that as a question for the church as well.

For Don, relationships matter more than total agreement. "I have grown more able to tolerate ambiguity as I have grown older," he reflects. "And I have seen evidence of faithfulness even in the lives of people who I think are wrong about some things."

I might be his blood relative, but the whole Church of

purchase tickets for a **Welcome Meal** at 5 p.m., where attendees can reconnect with old friends and make new ones, followed by **opening worship** at 6:45 p.m. An **ice cream social** in the exhibit hall, sponsored by Eder Financial, will follow worship.

"Imagine! A Morning of Sparking, Stirring, and Serving" is planned for Tuesday, June 30, with a **keynote address by Angelo Manté**, followed by **Bible studies**, educational **equipping sessions**, **service projects** benefiting the Fort Wayne community, and **networking opportunities**. Manté will share insights from the work in Fort Wayne of his nonprofit ALIVE Community Outreach focusing on restorative peacemaking, nonviolent education for youth, and support for survivors of violence.

Service projects on the morning of June 30 include **Fort Wayne Parks and Rec, Youth Programing**—volunteers will help provide a morning of fun for kids and youth and help paint a youth center; **Fort Wayne Parks and Rec, Park Clean-Up**—volunteers will help with brush clean-up at a park; **Just Neighbors**, a homeless shelter and network focused on keeping families together, supported by local congregations; **Miss Virginia's Food Pantry**—volunteers will work in the garden; **Wellspring Interfaith Social**—volunteers will help sort donations; **Clothes for Joes**, a store that provides clothing, hygiene products, and accessories to veterans; **Blessings in a Backpack**, which helps feed children at nine schools in the Fort Wayne area—volunteers will work at the convention center to prepare

"Believe Bags" for children. Sign up for a service project during registration or email [dnoffsnger@brethren.org](mailto:dnoffsnger@brethren.org). Details are at [www.brethren.org/ac2026/service-projects](http://www.brethren.org/ac2026/service-projects).

A concert after worship on Wednesday, July 1, features Church of the Brethren musicians Rhonda and Greg Baker, Leah Hileman, and Cody and Erin Flory Robertson.

A tour of the historic Embassy Theater, across the street from the convention center, is on Wednesday, July 1, from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. The cost of \$10 will be donated back to the theater by the Conference. The theater is an architectural gem dating to 1928, when it opened as a movie and vaudeville theater, saved from the wrecking ball in the 1970s. It houses the Grande Page Organ, one of only four ever built. The tour will include a

*Don looks forward to playing more disc golf after his term as moderator ends. He has managed to fit in a few rounds this year in his travels, including a good-natured drubbing at the hands of Dave Kerkove, pastor of South Waterloo Church of the Brethren in Northern Plains District.*



the Brethren is his family, too. And, like any family, it is held together not by uniformity, but by commitment.

### Moving forward


“I don’t know what the future of our church is,” says Don. “I’m not a Pollyanna who’s going to say that when I took over as moderator things were the worst they’ve ever been and one year later everything is now perfect.”

He knows the church faces real challenges, but he hopes this Conference will nudge Brethren in a positive direction.

Perhaps the church, like him, will keep taking steps forward even when the path is unclear—and someday, looking back, will see that it made sense.

After concluding his moderatorship, Lancaster Church of the Brethren will graciously grant Don a nine-week sabbatical. While he enjoyed discovering new disc golf courses on his travels and still managed to get in his daily 18-minute

naps and keep the bird feeders stocked for the bluebirds he likes to watch, he’s looking forward to more time for walks, bike rides, and tending his garden and apple trees.

I’m happy to share Brother Moderator with all of you. But I’ll be even happier when I get to spend a little more time with Dad. 

Marianne Fitzkee is communication and events specialist for Atlantic Northeast District. A graduate of Messiah University with degrees in Spanish and peace and conflict studies, she served a year and a half in Brethren Volunteer Service—in Quito, Ecuador, and Austin, Texas. She is a member of Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren.

“Perhaps the church, like him, will keep taking steps forward even when the path is unclear—and someday, looking back, will see that it made sense.”

concert on the organ with its 1,000-plus pipes and special effects.

### Witness to the Host City


**Alive Community Outreach**, a faith-based organization with a mission to cultivate a community of nonviolence in Fort Wayne through relationships and education, is the designated recipient of this year’s Witness to the Host City. It supports families affected by homicide and partners with schools to train high school students as peacemakers, building a culture of peace through violence prevention, restorative intervention, and survivor support rooted in Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of nonviolence (<https://alivefw.org>). Items to be collected at Annual Conference, in addition to monetary contributions, include supplies for the Peace Room

at each school that is supported by the organization including art supplies, snacks, and feminine products. Copies of two specific books also are requested, both available to purchase through Brethren Press at [www.brethrenpress.com](http://www.brethrenpress.com): *Healing Resistance*, by Kazu Haga, and *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, by David Kessler. Find out more at [www.brethren.org/ac2026/activities/witness-to-the-host-city](http://www.brethren.org/ac2026/activities/witness-to-the-host-city).

### Pre-Conference events

*The Ministers’ Association continuing education event* features Russell Haitch, Bethany Seminary professor of theology and human science, on “Redeeming AI: Biblical Guidelines.” Sessions begin Saturday evening, June 27, and continue through Sunday, June 28. Find out more and register at [www.brethren.org/ministryoffice](http://www.brethren.org/ministryoffice).

*Nonviolence, Hope, Courage, and Strategic Defiance!* is a training event from On Earth Peace, open to members of the church and interested members of the public. The weekend will include strategic nonviolence analysis, skill-building, and training to build spiritual and practical grounding and “activate nonviolent Christians in the context of political violence in the United States.” It starts Friday, June 26, at 6 p.m., continues through the day Saturday, June 27, and the morning of Sunday, June 28. Find out more and register at [www.onearthpeace.org](http://www.onearthpeace.org).

The full Conference schedule also includes Bible studies, meal events, a blood drive, age group activities, exhibits, a silent auction, and more. For details and registration go to [www.brethren.org/ac2026](http://www.brethren.org/ac2026). 

# The space between us

by John Fillmore and Nancy Sollenberger Heishman

**H**uman beings are created for community, and so the relational space between us matters. It is in that space that love and compassion flourish. It is in that same space that conflict can grow.

If we hope to have vital and thriving relationships, it is essential to attend to the space between us. As we interact with each other, we bring each layer of ourselves to the exchange. We bring our inner self, we bring all the unique gifts and characteristics we have been given, and we bring the sometimes misshapen vision of our being that has been distorted by the negative influences we encounter. It is often that distorted sense of self that leads to conflict.

And what a wearying time this is, especially for anyone in church leadership. Those called to shepherd the flock and give guidance and direction often find themselves mired in the thick of intractable conflicts. Before they know it, differences have led to disagreements that have led to standoffs.

It is precisely this trajectory that Betty Pries addresses in her book *The Space Between Us: Conversations about Transforming Conflict*. While conflict resolution or mediation can offer us techniques that contribute to a certain harmony between conflicted people,

in order to truly transform conflict we need to dig into our deeper sense of self and learn to relate to each other from the more authentic parts of who we are.

Conflict arises when we feel our sense of self being threatened: We “appear to have an inborn inclination to protect our selfhood,” she says. This perceived attack on our sense of self can lead to powerful emotional reactions. Rather than focusing on the problem itself, we start to see the perceived source of the threat—the other person or group—as the problem.

It is easy to see that much of our current polarization and cultural clashes over identity are rooted in this perceived threat to our selfhood. Conflicts between individuals, within congregations, and in our denomination are often characterized as attacks on who we are as a person. If there ever were a time to explore the transformation of conflict, it would be now.


Pries observes that our sense of self is constructed from three layers—the inner, deeper self; the self of our unique gifts and characteristics that she calls the descriptive self; and that outer defended self that is designed to protect our vulnerability.

This defended self is not an accurate description of who we are; it is simply the shell we create to hide our human brokenness and protect ourselves from what we believe are outside threats. But

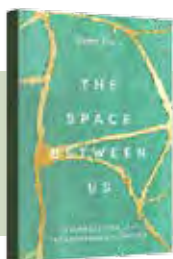
it becomes what we lead with, what we most readily rely on to interact with others. And when it feels threatened by the other, it shifts the tension of the disagreement to the other person or group—who becomes the source of the pain, resulting in conflict.

To understand how to transform our inner condition and keep disagreements from devolving into conflict, Pries uses the illustration of a properly seasoned meal. Good cooks know that adding seasoning early in the cooking process will allow the food to be “salted from the inside.”

A key to transforming conflict resides within our own hearts. It is not sprinkled on from the outside. It is living and leading out of the true self rather than being overly directed by the contorted and misshapen defended self. Transforming conflict requires us to relate to each other from the deeper, inner self, where we are beloved children of God.

When we see the belovedness of the other, and our deeper self connects with their deeper self, then we have the capacity to engage with conflict well. May God’s gift of belovedness within us reach to the other, so that we are all salted from the inside with God’s delicious love. 

John Fillmore is district executive minister for Idaho/Western Montana District and Nancy Sollenberger Heishman is director of the Ministry Office for the Church of the Brethren.



## AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Betty Pries will be the speaker at three events at Annual Conference: the Discipleship and Leadership Formation Dinner, an equipping session, and the Clergywomen’s Breakfast. She will also do a book-signing at the Brethren Press bookstore.



# JIM and PAM with us to the end

by Brian Messler

**I**f you saw the title and started thinking that this was an article about *The Office*, I am going to disappoint you right off the bat. While this is a cute acronym, I will not be talking about my favorite character, Kevin, or what a day on Schrute Farms would be like. Rather, I will be sharing a process that has radically changed how Ephrata Church of the Brethren looks at starting and stopping ministries.

Having spent most of my time as a pastor in larger congregations, I have given much attention to starting ministries that impact the church and the community. We pray over new initiatives, find leaders, articulate vision, and step forward in faith.

Yet often less attention is paid to how ministries end. Sunsetting a ministry is frequently handled quietly or awkwardly—and occasionally painfully. To be candid, I have ended some ministries in healthy ways, and others, well, let's just say, not so much. We have yet to understand how to give

ministries that have run their course a nice burial. And yet, scripture and church wisdom remind us that how a ministry ends matters just as much as how it begins.

Ending a ministry is not a sign of failure. In many cases, it is an act of faithfulness, discernment, humility, and obedience. When done in a healthy and prayerful way, endings can become moments of spiritual maturity, communal healing, and renewed mission. Ministries, opportunities, and structures are here to serve God's purposes for a particular time and context. When that context changes—or when God's purpose has been fulfilled—letting go may be the best act of faithful response to those changes.

King Solomon's wisdom in Ecclesiastes reminds us that staying power is not the goal; obedience is. Ministries are tools, not idols (read that again and again if you need to). When we cling to ministries, locally, nationally, and globally, beyond their

intended season, we confuse tradition with calling.

Throughout scripture, we see God intentionally bringing seasons to a close. Moses did not enter the Promised Land, yet his ministry was not a failure. In Deuteronomy 34, his leadership concludes with an intentional transition. God commissions Joshua, and Moses blesses the people before his death.

The ministry did not “collapse”; it transitioned. Moses's ending was marked by obedience, humility, and trust in God's ongoing work beyond his leadership. Ministries don't need to end in difficulty; they can end in faith-

## Taking the lead

**Brian Messler introduced JIM and PAM** at the Church of the Brethren L.E.A.D. Conference held May 1-3 at Ephrata (Pa.) Church of the Brethren.

“The church is called not merely to start well, but to finish well. Ministries are gifts for a season, entrusted to us by God for his purposes.”

fulness and forward momentum.

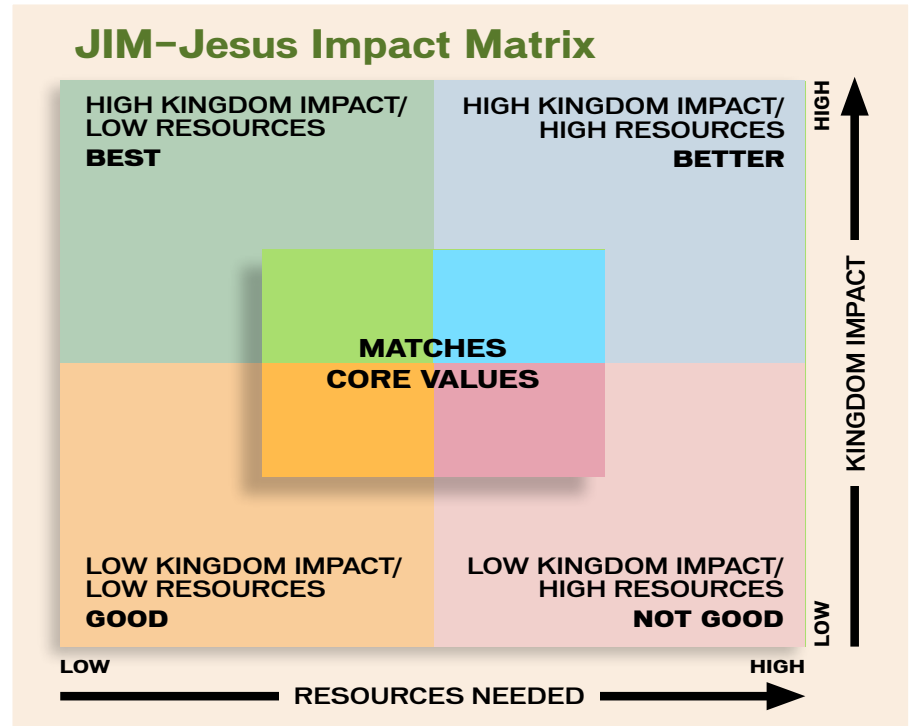
Bringing this to our local contexts, I have seen and experienced ministries that carry on way past their intended purpose. I have seen volunteers exhausted and frustrated by the lack of fruit their ministry once bore. In fact, churches that never end ministries often suffer from a lack of discernment over starting and stopping ministry opportunities. Yes, volunteers burn out, but staff also become stretched too thin. Vision becomes cluttered. Energy is spent maintaining structures rather than advancing the mission.

Peter Drucker often emphasized that effectiveness is not about doing more things, but about doing the right things. When churches refuse to end ministries, they risk elevating comfort over calling. Jesus' words in John 15:2 (ESV) are challenging: "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." At some point, all things need to end—that isn't failure, it's preparation for a deeper level of faithfulness.

While ending a ministry may be strategically wise, it is always congregationally and emotionally significant. Ministries carry stories, relationships, memories, and spiritual milestones for so many people. For some, a ministry represents the place where they first encountered Christ, found healing, or discovered their gifts. As leaders, we need to be compassionate and grace-filled when ending ministries, because ending a ministry without honoring its people risks wounding the very body Christ calls us to shepherd.

### Meet JIM and PAM

When a ministry needs to end, we often get stuck in the how-and-why



part of that needed ending. This is where JIM and PAM come in. While JIM and PAM can be used for families, individuals, and organizations, for our context here we will use the church as the backdrop.

JIM—Jesus Impact Matrix is a document that helps congregations begin a conversation about whether God may be calling them to stop or start ministries.

PAM—Process and Management is a document that helps us know how to use JIM for its intended purpose. PAM is in the details; JIM reveals the big picture.

The roles of JIM and PAM are simple: to create an assessment of a ministry so that a healthy, objective conversation can take place about whether to start, stop, or elevate it.

Here's how we've used JIM and PAM at Ephrata.

We have a set of core values and a vision that connect to everything we

do as a congregation. If it doesn't fit in those areas, we don't do it—it is truly that simple. We know what our strengths are, we know what our growing edges are, and we prefer to operate out of our strengths and then support other organizations or congregations that are operating in those areas where we are weak.

In the JIM document, there's a space to fill in our core values. These come into play further into the process as we begin to determine what to keep, start, or enhance.

There are three main assessment tools to use for this discernment. First, we take a look at the impact of a ministry. Assessing this numerically is subjective and takes time to pray through and discern. Questions that can be asked: How has this ministry over the last year impacted our church? How has it impacted the community we are

“When we cling to ministries, locally, nationally, and globally, beyond their intended season, we confuse tradition with calling.”

“Ending one ministry is meant to open doors to new expressions of calling, not leave people spiritually displaced.”



...serving? Impact can look like attendance, whether people accepted Jesus, or whether people deepened their discipleship.

Understanding whether it had a high or low kingdom impact is important to the process. This matrix attempts to turn something that is not easily quantifiable (faith-building) into something that can be measured, even if only subjectively and cautiously.

The second part of the assessment focuses on resources. This is where most of the quantifiable work occurs. PAM invites you to look at three matrices: How much time does it take? How many resources does it take? How much energy does it take? Making these numeric assessments provides a starting point for determining whether the event is high- or low-resource.

Finally, we can determine whether the church is highly involved in this. While this part of the process is not included in the grid, it is helpful to know whether an event is being implemented by the entire church or just a few people.

Once the prayer, conversation, and assessment are complete, our team places the event on the grid where it is evaluated. In the four sections, High Impact, Low Resources (Best), High Impact, High Resources (Better), Low Impact, Low Resources (Good), Low

Impact, High Resources (Bad), we see where the ministry lies.

Next, we look at our ministry and see whether it aligns with one or more of our core values. For Ephrata, we look at core values such as being outward focused, family oriented, or biblical hospitality, and determine if that ministry embodies any of them. If the ministry reveals several of those core values, it is placed in the smaller center square in the same part of the grid to enable additional conversation.

Finally, we look around the community and ask: Are others doing this ministry? How can we support them? Is this something that is unique to us? Is the need so great that multiple places need to provide the same kind of ministry? When we do that, it opens the possibility of organizations working together for a common goal without ego or pride getting in the way.

There is much to learn from JIM and PAM in terms of helping a congregation discern whether to start or stop a ministry or project. However, the intent of this tool is not to make the decision, but rather to start a conversation to see whether it fits the calling God has for us.

At Ephrata, we have had tough conversations about stopping decades-old ministries. We have also started new ministries that have been highly impactful, all the while taking less of a toll on our volunteers. In addition, the tool has helped us to look at ministries in a low-impact, high-resource section and retool them so they can move to another section of the grid because they so deeply match our core values. Conversation is vital; this is what PAM and JIM have helped us do.

Ending well is important, but it

doesn't have to be filled with conflict or struggle. When done in a healthy way, specific characteristics emerge:

1. *Discernment through prayer:* Decisions to end ministries should be soaked in prayer and communal discernment. Ministry endings should never be merely reactive or purely pragmatic.

2. *Clear and honest communication:* Transparency builds trust. When lead-

## Definitions

Here are definitions of words used in the PAM document:

*Kingdom impact:* the positive, transformative influence that advances God's mission on earth. It is the way in which people are brought closer to God and demonstrate the character and nature of Jesus in the world.

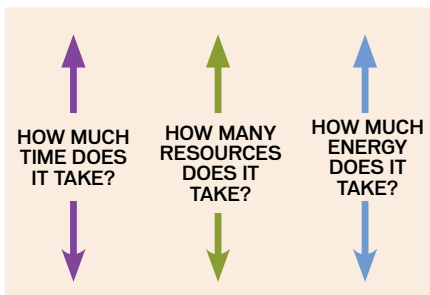
*Core values:* the beliefs an organization has that shape how they follow Christ, how they make decisions, and how they relate to one another.

*Ministry involvement:* a quantitative description of how many people are involved in the planning and implementation of a ministry or event.

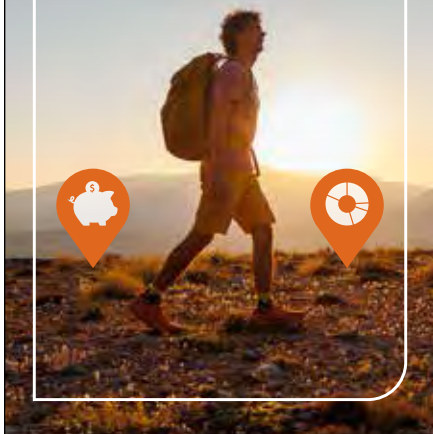
*Energy:* the amount of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual time dedicated to a specific ministry or event.

*Time:* the number of hours or days dedicated to planning an implementing a ministry or event.

*Resources:* the amount of space and money dedicated to the ministry or event.



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ers and teams can clearly explain why a ministry is ending, even those who grieve are more likely to feel respected.

3. *Gratitude and celebration:* Ending a ministry should include a time of gratitude and celebration, publicly naming what God has done through it. Celebration redeems endings from bitterness.


4. *Care for those affected:* Not everyone will experience an ending the same way. Wise leaders make space for grief, questions, and conversation.

5. *Intentional transition:* Finally, leaders should help people find new places to serve or connect. Ending one ministry is meant to open doors to new expressions of calling, not leave people spiritually displaced.

Ending a ministry often requires more humility, energy, care, and compassion than starting one. It forces us, as leaders and congregations, to

acknowledge our own limits, mistakes, or changing realities.

Dallas Willard, in his reflections on spiritual leadership, frequently noted that true leadership is measured by faithfulness, not visibility or longevity. The act of letting go can be one of deep trust in God's vision for us and not our own desires and wants.

The church is called not merely to start well, but to finish well. Ministries are gifts for a season, entrusted to us by God for his purposes. May we be churches that celebrate beginnings with joy, serve faithfully in the middle, and embrace endings with courage—trusting that the same God who calls ministries into being also leads them, gently and faithfully, to their close. And in every season, may Christ be glorified. 

Brian Messler is pastor of Ephrata (Pa.) Church of the Brethren.



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# WHEN THE CHURCH BEGINS TO HOPE

by Gene Hollenberg

**M**any fantasy and science fiction stories describe hopeless worlds, where life—devoid of joy—seems to fade gray to black, shrouded in darkness. No foreseeable future exists where people are not suffering under the domination of a privileged group or class. Modern dystopian stories include Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm*, for instance. Slowly, but steadily, people give up their freedoms and ideals for the illusion of safety, usually at the expense of manufactured fear of “the other.”

*Wicked* and *Wicked: For Good*, adapted from a more recent dystopian novel, illustrate how power and authority lead to oppression. The first movie ends with the formation of an unlikely alliance of heroes and uncovers the evil aspirations of authority.

Elphaba, the protagonist we assumed to be wicked, thanks to the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*, is revealed as a kind

and talented young woman, rejected and bullied from birth because she is different. She has grown up believing the wizard to be a benevolent protector with great power. When her disabled sister is ready to attend college, their parents send Elphaba along as her caretaker. Her hidden talents are discovered, and she is enrolled as well.

There, she discovers that the animals—who in that magical world have the intellect and speech of humans—are identified as a “threatening” group by those promoting the wizard. The wizard’s government takes freedom and rights away from them in the name of protecting the people from the animals’ “evil intentions.” Her trust is broken when she discovers the wizard and others have been betraying the animals to gain power.

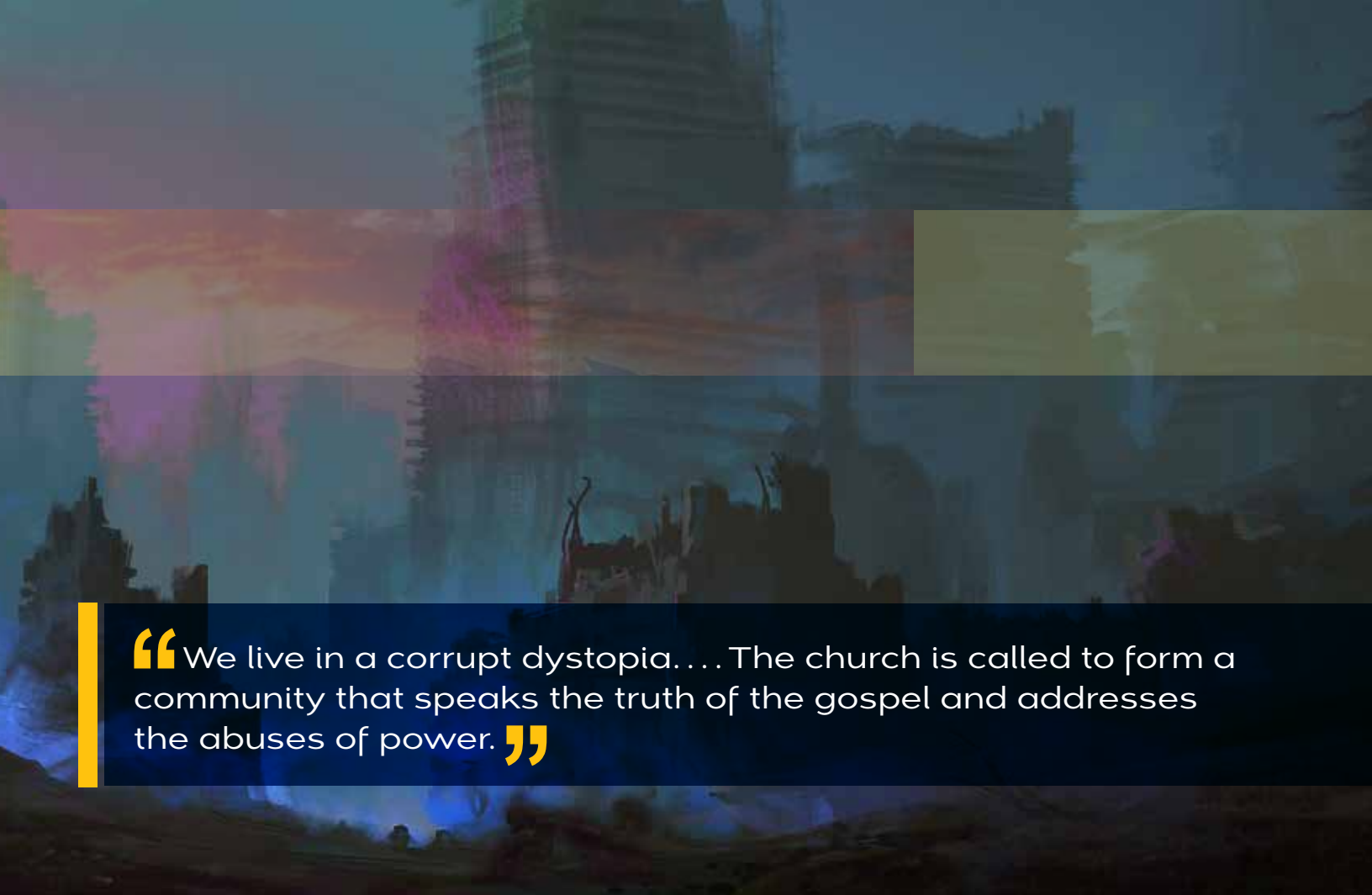
History shows that when those in power desire greater authority, they attempt to gain it in one of two ways:

They either force people into submission through strength, or they identify a group and persuade the community that the group is a threat, asking for greater authority to keep everyone safe. New manufactured “crises” lead to more blame and continued forfeiting of freedom, until enough strength has been built that injustice no longer needs to be hidden. The authority has the capacity to do whatever it wants without reprisal.

Sadly, history also demonstrates that religion has been complicit, through either active support or silence.

Dystopian literature serves as a warning. When we believe that one group is superior to another or fail to call out injustice, we empower those who manipulate people into trading their freedom and self-determination for false security. Until recently, I thought our society was far from that danger. I’m not sure what to think now.

As a member of the Church of the



“ We live in a corrupt dystopia. . . . The church is called to form a community that speaks the truth of the gospel and addresses the abuses of power. ”

Brethren and a follower of Jesus, I struggle knowing that history suggests authority is rarely broken without violent revolution. So, how do we see Jesus respond?

During Jesus' ministry, the entire Western world was part of the Roman Empire. Romans considered the Pax Romana—a peace maintained by brutal suppression of all opposition—to be utopia. However, for conquered people, it was dystopia. Roads lined with soldiers and loaded crosses were stark reminders of the consequences of revolt.

Governors and puppet kings had two responsibilities: keep control and collect taxes to support wealth and luxury for the elite. The common people of Judea and Galilee viewed their religious leaders as Roman collaborators. Some instead followed revolutionary leaders who proclaimed that God would bring about justice violently, thus replacing one failed utopia with another.

Jesus, however, began his ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Luke 4:18-19, CEB).

His message of nonviolent adherence to the Law, as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount, echoed the words of the prophets who called people back to God's plan of loving care for each other.

In a time similar to that of Jesus, when a violent response to oppression led to the temple's destruction and the exile of God's people, the prophet Jeremiah called the people to true obedience:


*. . . [I]f you truly reform your ways and your actions; if you*

*treat each other justly; if you stop taking advantage of the immigrant, orphan, or widow; if you don't shed the blood of the innocent in this place, or go after other gods to your own ruin, only then will I dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave long ago to your ancestors for all time* (Jeremiah 7:5-7, CEB).

Jeremiah—and Jesus—insisted that rituals and buildings were not nearly as important as faithful living. And so we, in this time of crisis need to affirm:

**The church is not a building or organization.** What we call church is created by people—not God. We are not protected or justified because we attend or financially support it. Religion is not the goal; rather, the church's purpose is to share the grace and love of God through word and action.

**Faith and action instead of ritual.** The manner or frequency of our



“When we, the church, trust God and follow Jesus, we demonstrate hope for God’s vision of peace and justice by tangibly providing for the needs of the community.”

worship is not important. God cares about how we respond to the world. Are we living out God’s vision to love God and all people as illustrated in both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels?

**Work toward social justice.** God calls for justice. Scripture consistently demands that we care for immigrants, refugees, the oppressed, and the poor, while condemning the idolatry of wealth and violence. Perhaps the greatest failing of the history of God’s people is the refusal to follow the command of Jubilee—the acknowledgment that, because wealth becomes concentrated, a reset is periodically necessary. There is enough for everyone.

**The consequences of disobedience.** We risk isolation from God and God’s blessings when we ignore God’s call to obedience.

In nearly every instance of oppression, religion is part of the problem. It has given cover to power. It has sought to appease rather than challenge. It has subverted true justice to popular opinion. Christianity has turned a revolutionary Jesus into a defender of the status quo as defined by governments and the wealthy.

Our own denomination, born in courageous defiance of authority over principles of faith, has gradually stepped away from positions of radical peace and defense of the oppressed. In many congregations, some children of God are not affirmed or even welcomed. We have abandoned counting

the cost of living the powerful, inconvenient, disruptive, and complete love that Jesus calls us to give.

What would it mean for the church to boldly call out prejudice, injustice, corruption, and violence? To reclaim peace, love, joy, and hope? To respond with action, no matter the cost? To pronounce and pursue God’s Jubilee?

**T**he first hymn in a new hymnal is extremely important. In 1992, the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonite churches collaborated on *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. They chose “What Is This Place?” as hymn No. 1.

In answer to the title’s question, the hymn affirms that, while we meet in “Only a house, the earth its floor,” with “windows for light” and an “open door,” it becomes “a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know our God is near.”

The words of scripture “sent from the past are what we need,” the lyrics continue. In communion, we accept bread “broken and shared, a living sign,” and in this world we are called to be “each other’s bread and wine.”

And finally, strengthened by the Word and each other, “we can receive what we need to increase: God’s justice and God’s peace.”


We live in a corrupt dystopia. The world perverts God’s Word by twisting it to support structures that support increasing power and wealth at

the expense of the powerless and the poor. When the church fails to act, abandoning the courage and faith exhibited in the life of Jesus, it weakens—and complicitly supports—the corrupt cruelty of evil. The church is called to form a community that speaks the truth of the gospel and addresses the abuses of power.

In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus says:

*“All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them”* (CEB).

When we, the church, trust God and follow Jesus, we demonstrate hope for God’s vision of peace and justice by tangibly providing for the needs of the community, welcoming everyone without limitation, calling out injustice wherever it appears, and proclaiming Jubilee. In this way we can break down structural and spiritual walls, ultimately defeating corrupt power.

What is this church? A refuge? An instrument of peace? The utopian kingdom of the gospel? Can we, through our actions and witness, become a beacon of hope? Jesus died for the least of these. What are we willing to do? 

Gene Hollenberg is executive director of Camp Alexander Mack in Milford, Ind., and previously served as a school administrator.

! "Imagine That!" is an occasional column inviting Christians to see things differently.

# The proper use of a rearview mirror

by Don Fitzkee

**In an era when a political movement** is trying to take the country back to some real or imagined golden age to make us great again, how should Brethren conceptualize the relationship between past and future?

Truth be told, Brethren were born facing backward, and some might say we've been a little that way ever since. The original Brethren were restitutionists. They believed the established churches had wandered far from the unadulterated faith of the "primitive church" described in the New Testament. The early Brethren thought the way forward was to return to the gold standard of the early church. (I guess they didn't read some of the epistles all that closely.)

In *Brethren Society* (p. 104), Carl F. Bowman described how this understanding of faithfulness began to crumble during the late 1800s as traditional views were challenged:

*Some began to suspect that many of the so-called ancient practices were simply "cultural traditions" that had accumulated over the years, steering the church away from the gospel. Others saw any departure from these practices as abandonment of the pure gospel, conditioned by the social pressures of an apostate world.... Was a faith that failed to change and evolve dead, or was it pure and undiluted? Was the primary Brethren objective still to restore the primitive church, or was it to be open to progressive revelation and spiritual growth?*

Good questions.


"Imagine!"—the forward-facing theme of the 2026 Church of the Brethren Annual Conference—is designed to help us think together about a brighter future. But the daily topics for our worship services are old favorites plucked straight from the Bible and Brethren heritage curricula—radical discipleship, a New Testament church, peace, community, service. Clearly the moderator is trying to have it both ways. What if striking the proper balance between past and future is a key to a healthy church?

As noted in the Annual Conference theme statement, scholar Walter Brueggemann in his classic work *The Prophetic Imagination* argued that the role of a prophet is to imagine new possibilities. Paradoxically, Brueggemann suggested that visions and dreams for a hopeful future often reappropriate themes and symbols from the past that are rooted in God's call and faithfulness—a newness that is so old, he wrote, that it has been forgotten.

Greatness can't be accomplished by never changing or by seeking to return to an earlier era. Even if we could go back, the good old days probably weren't as good as we remember them. But faithful change is informed by themes and symbols from our past.

Bethany Theological Seminary president Jeff Carter has been making the rounds with a presentation on the church in a changing culture. After documenting some discouraging trends for Christianity in the US, he suggests that the church needs to examine ways that our time-tested values can meet today's opportunities. Values endure, but their application changes.

A rearview mirror is an image that has helped me understand the relationship between past and future. Such a mirror is an essential tool for safe driving, but only if we use it properly. If we focus solely on the rear view, before long we'll find ourselves in the ditch. Our gaze needs to be forward but with frequent backward glances to maintain awareness of our broader context. If we're honest, in that rearview mirror we'll see some things that are best left behind and others that merit a closer look.

I hope our preachers at Annual Conference this year examine their familiar themes with a rearview mirror in mind—glancing back to identify enduring values but focusing forward to find new expressions of ancient themes and symbols. Imagine that! 

Don Fitzkee is co-pastor at Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren and 2026 Annual Conference moderator.

“If we focus solely on the rear view, before long we'll find ourselves in the ditch.”

October, 14, 1950

## Invocation for Another Conference

By Kermit Eby, adapted by Werner Bloomberg

Jesus walked among the people and spoke the words  
of peace and brotherhood to any who would listen.  
Suppose we did that.

Just imagine it!

Imagine thousands of us day after day  
walking among our fellow men and talking

to all who would listen

of the word of God and its meaning for the world today.

Who can estimate the consequences?

How many would listen and how many would turn aside,  
and how many would listen who had never listened before?

Foolish, you say?

Is it any more foolish than to do again what  
we have done before

day after day and year after year  
and failed to prevent one war,  
one materialistic revolution,

one riot of ugly hate,  
or one atom bomb?

But it would not succeed, you say?

Good! Let it fail!

Are we succeeding now?

Could we go down to defeat any faster than by  
the hydrogen bomb?

Let us not deceive ourselves further.

We are rushing downhill to defeat.

If there is a chance for this generation  
it lies with those who will meet the absolute weapon  
with an absolute ethic.

And if there is no chance, at least  
let us go down to defeat

on our own terms.

There is some Christian dignity in that.

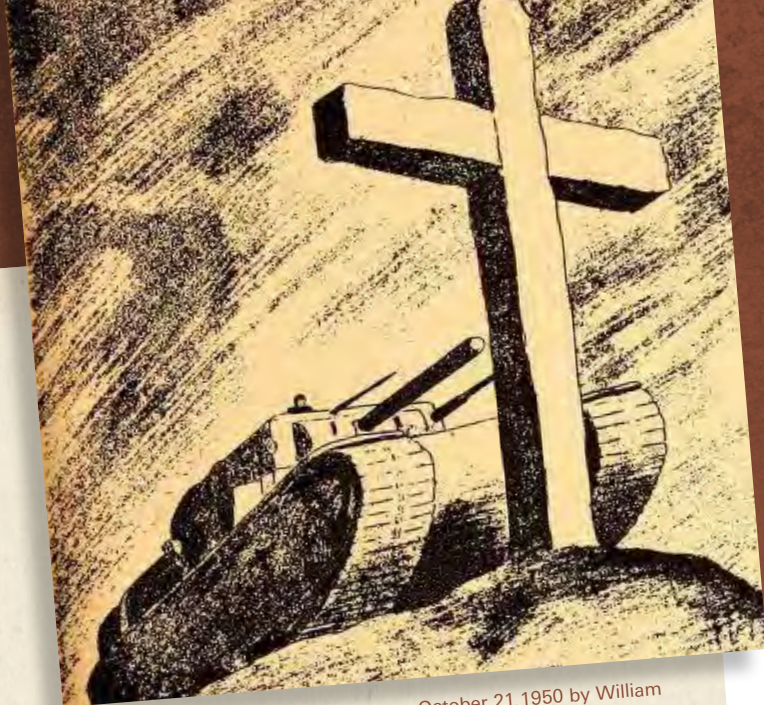


Illustration from *The Gospel Messenger*, October 21, 1950 by William Schulz, Jr., from a sketch by Dean Egge.

What if we really did it?

What if we dropped our conferences and  
our high-level politics

and our big-time lectures and our capital investments  
and went out among the people

as brothers and men of God—

Might we find the divine spark in our own time:

Might we not find followers,

hundreds, then thousands, our brothers and fellow men?

What if we touched the chord that set the chorus?

What if we uttered the word that started the prayer?

All the longing of the people  
whom we have left behind,

all the hope of men

who yet may seek,

all the profound yearning

of the children of God--

waiting to be set in motion.

What if we dared?

—O brethren,

let us pray.

This is an excerpt from "Invocation for Another Conference,"  
*The Gospel Messenger*, October 14, 1950.

“ WHAT IF WE TOUCHED THE CHORD THAT SET THE CHORUS?  
WHAT IF WE UTTERED THE WORD THAT STARTED THE PRAYER? ”

“ WE ARE IN A DRIFT AWAY FROM OUR TRADITIONAL AMERICAN LIBERTIES AND TOWARD THE WAYS OF THE POLICE STATE WHICH WE SO HEARTILY CONDEMN. ”

October 21, 1950

## Is your congregation on the job for peace?

Edited by Lorrell Weiss

**I**S YOUR CONGREGATION ON THE JOB in the present world crisis? The test of a church's effectiveness is whether it can give Christian guidance in time of trouble. The Korean war is such a time. It has not become World War III yet, but our country's preparations for a big war are ominous.

Are we, as a church, preparing in our own way? Here are some things which each local church should be doing:

### DRAFT COUNSEL

*Provide competent advice on draft problems.* Advisers should keep fully informed and up-to-date on draft regulations, new developments, our church's advice to draftees, and our program of constructive service.

They should also keep our young people in touch with Brethren Service volunteer projects. If alternative service is later required of conscientious objectors, some of these projects may prove acceptable. Brethren and Mennonites are now working with our government and the United Nations on plans in this direction.

### PEACE EDUCATION

*Carry on a definite, vigorous program of peace education.* To begin now is somewhat late, of course. But better late than never!

Two things are especially important. First, peace education should answer questions. Though Annual Conference repeatedly says that war is sin, many Brethren, even some ministers, remain unconvinced. Few people vote against the statement in Conference, but many have problems and questions which we usually fail to answer.

The best hope of satisfying answers is through discussion where honest questions can be freely asked and sympathetically considered. This takes time. A single evening will rarely be enough.

Second, peace education ought to include careful study of fundamental issues. The most important of these is God's will about war and peace as revealed by Jesus. Another is the nature of international relations which lead to war or peace.

Still another involves the meaning of the various positions

which Brethren might take toward military service—full service (I-A), noncombatant service (I-A-O), objection to all forms of military service (IV-E), and the absolute or nonregistrant position.

### WITNESS AND PROTEST

*Make an audible witness for peace and protest against war and militarism.* If we really believe that all war is sin and that the coming war will be sin, we ought to say so. We can make our testimony in casual conversations, interviews with congressmen and officials, letters to editors, mass meetings—wherever there is opportunity to express an opinion.

Our protests may be as hopeless as Jeremiah's but Jeremiahs may be as much needed now as when the kingdom of Judah was collapsing.

### SERVICE PROJECTS

*Engage more actively in local church service projects.* There is a double need for these.

From without there is the continuing need of the last war's victims as well as the new crop of sufferers in Korea.

From within there is our own need to reinforce our beliefs with action. Talk is not enough to keep our convictions strong. We must roll up our sleeves and go to work. That was what made our testimony effective in World War II.

### DISASTER PLANS

*Prepare for disaster or persecution.* As we do so, let us hope and pray that they will not come.

We must face the possibility of disaster at the hands of an enemy. Some phases of civilian defense will be contrary to our consciences; others, such as aid to the suffering, will appeal to us. Where to draw the line is a problem which we must study now.

Shocking as it may seem, disaster might also come to us at the hands of Americans. We are in a drift away from our traditional American liberties and toward the ways of the police state which we so heartily condemn. Unpopular minority views, such as our belief in peace, may be tolerated less and less.

Without undue alarm, we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility of persecution. The early Brethren urged applicants for baptism to count the cost. We can profit by their example if, after counting the cost, we continue to do our duty.

This article is condensed from *The Gospel Messenger*, October 21, 1950.

**Matthew 28:18-20; Hebrews 10:22-25**

# Fellowship through worship

by Naomi Kraenbring

**I** have watched my congregation experience an increased number of new participants, several of whom recently joined the church as members. Some of these new people are long-term members of another Church of the Brethren congregation. Some are very new to our heritage and particular tradition of Christianity. Some are seeking a fresh start in this place, having been hurt by or frustrated with the church in other places.

Our congregation also has many members who have been part of this church for decades. Some were born into the church or brought in as children many years ago. Some have parents and grandparents and great-grandparents who were Brethren ministers or have been part of Brethren communities for generations. Others have not been part of this congregation for quite

as long but bring roots steeped in the Church of the Brethren or other Anabaptist groups.

Long-term and newer community participants, life-long Brethren and those strongly influenced by other Christian traditions: How do we build community together?

## Unity in Jesus

The culminating words of the final chapter of Matthew's Gospel come from Jesus to the disciples after Jesus' resurrection. His followers have experienced the grief of his death and the joy of his resurrection, and now might be wondering, "What's next?" The disciples respond to the instructions that Jesus gave to the women gathered at the tomb, and they meet back in Galilee, on the mountain. This topographical location elevates the theological significance of what Jesus

will say, in the same way it did for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. It places Jesus between heaven and earth, emphasizing his human and now-divine characteristics.

Matthew's Gospel indicates that the disciples worshiped him, but "some doubted" (28:17, CEB). That uncertainty sets the stage for what has become known as the "great commission," Jesus' final instructions to the disciples in Matthew's account.

First, Jesus assures them of his authority. The references to heaven and earth are perhaps dually emphasized by the named location on the mountain and the resurrection that has just been witnessed. The focus is clearly on Jesus' sacred and powerful connection with the one, true God.

The following two verses (vv. 19-20) contain quite a few verbs: go, make, bap-

“The role of the community of believers is to “provoke one another to love and good deeds.””

tize, teach, obey, remember. Jesus sends the disciples out into the world. They are commanded to share the message, the good news, with all they meet, everywhere. This command has historically, at times, been used to force a doctrinal system on groups, but perhaps it is instead intended as a living model, based in relationship with both humanity and God.

Finally, Jesus' words provide assurance a second time, this time emphasizing that he will always be with them.

But first, notably, before any of these instructions from Jesus, the disciples worshiped him. Even if they doubted, they worshiped. Even if they weren't sure what was going to come next, they worshiped. Even though they were a confused mix of perspectives and levels of understanding, they worshiped. And they worshiped together, not individually and not alone.

This reassurance given to the disciples and the call for them to share this love with others extends beyond the disciples as individual people to communities of faithful followers trying to understand their relationship to God and to each other. The church is reassured and instructed to share the good news wholly and holistically, across time and place.

### Unity in community

The book of Hebrews, like the closing verses of the Gospel of Matthew, aims to assure and prompt early Christ followers to action. In this book, likely written in the late first century, some believers seem to be struggling with their faith. They have not seen Jesus return, as they had hoped. With the distance of time and space from Jesus' ministry, they may be finding it more challenging to remain faithful.

The unknown author of Hebrews attempts to remind believers of the

basis of their faith in Jesus Christ. In chapter 10, the author reminds followers of the forgiveness available through loving and worshiping Jesus. The death of Jesus is interpreted as an offering, a sacrifice for humanity, which has far more value than the offerings in worship by priests (v. 11).

In Hebrews 10:24-25, the role of the community is highlighted. The role of the community of believers is to “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” In the Common English Bible translation, this gathered worship is “for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds.” Generative energy for the benefit of others is created and develops as beloved friends are together with God.

The faithful community is also reminded to continue to worship together (v. 25). It seems that some are not doing this. They are also asked to encourage each other, lift each other up, and support one another, more and more. Their continued hope rests in what is to come—the hope of Jesus' return. This idea would be very familiar to the earliest Brethren and other Anabaptists who found mutual aid and support to be an integral part of their relationships with one another.

### Unity in heritage


In 2025, the Church of the Brethren, alongside the Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups, celebrated the 500-year anniversary of the Anabaptist movement. The year 1525 is recognized as the beginning of Anabaptism, when the first group met for worship in Zurich, Switzerland, and were rebaptized, challenging the political alignment of church and state. They declared by their action that they were unified in a new understanding of proclaiming Jesus Christ—or perhaps a very old understanding—as they sought to return to the practices of the earliest

ancient Christian disciples.

Even though the act of baptism is a very individual experience of committing one's life to Jesus, it is also a very communal worship experience. The public nature of baptism for the Brethren is a critical piece in understanding the role of God's care for one and for all. For some, witnessing the baptisms of others reminds them of their own baptismal vows and experience. Hearing the rush of water as a baptismal candidate is immersed and seeing the water drip down can take observers back to their own experiences. They might remember how the water felt and who was present for the service.

The language of familiar Brethren baptismal vows can be traced back to the Matthew 28 instructions to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19). The heritage of the Brethren is deep and wide, extending back over 300 years to the beginning of the Church of the Brethren denomination in 1708.

The Anabaptist movement began even earlier, over 500 years ago. The writing of Matthew's Gospel was almost 2,000 years ago. Unity can be found in each and all of these heritage paths. Identifying the common history and theological streams of which we are a part increases affinity for one another and helps to establish a firmer sense of self-identity in Christ.

We find ourselves in quite different cultures and times, but the unity found in love for God and love for neighbor as we worship Jesus together in community stands the test of time. 

This Bible study is reprinted from the spring 2026 quarter of *A Guide for Biblical Studies*, published by Brethren Press. The quarter is co-written by Naomi Kraenbring and Liz Bidgood Enders, members of the pastoral team at Elizabethtown (Pa.) Church of the Brethren.

## Church supports asylum seekers in Supreme Court

**T**he Supreme Court in late March heard arguments in *Noem v. Al Otro Lado*, in which the Church of the Brethren joined an interfaith amicus brief filed on behalf of the plaintiffs. Some 30 faith organizations filed the amicus curiae brief coordinated by the Kairos Center on Religion, Rights, and Justice.

The case focuses on Department of Homeland Security authority to prevent individuals from entering the United States at ports of entry to file for asylum. Plaintiffs challenged a DHS interpretation of 8 U.S.C 1158(a)(1), which states that

“[a]ny alien who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States ... may apply for asylum.” DHS has interpreted the language to mean that the individual must step across the border, and that an individual stopped right at the border is not eligible to apply for asylum.

The Ninth Circuit Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and the federal government appealed to the Supreme Court. If DHS prevails, the case will effectively allow the US to refuse asylum to all asylum seekers who seek to enter lawfully at a US border.



Hannah Nelson, a Brethren Volunteer Service worker at the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy, holds a sign at the interfaith vigil outside the Supreme Court.

## Board urges prayerful action to support immigrants

**T**he Mission and Ministry Board issued the resolution “Walking Together: Immigration, Peacemaking, Conscience, and Supporting One’s Neighbors” emphasizing the church’s longstanding commitment to civil disobedience when government policies are unjust or conflict with biblical teachings.

The board drew on decades of church statements to urge individuals, congregations, districts, and the denomination to support immigrant communities, speak out against policies that harm families, and engage in civil disobedience when necessary. “Church of the Brethren history and tradition include radical discipleship, conscientious objection, and participation in civil disobedience,” the board said.

The resolution grew out of an Atlantic Southeast District query referred by the Annual Conference officers so that an urgent question could be answered in a timely way. It was prepared by a board-appointed committee and will be passed on to Annual Conference.

The board acted during its March 13-15 meeting in Modesto, Calif. The meeting was led by chair Kathy Mack with chair-elect Josiah Ludwick and general secretary David Steele.

A highlight was attendance Sunday morning at five congregations in the area. Board members and staff spread out to visit Empire Church of the Brethren, Centro Agape en Acción in Los Banos, Nueva Visión la Hermosa in Waterford, Prince of Peace Church of the Brethren in Sacramento, and Modesto Church of the Brethren.



Board members and staff visited several Church of the Brethren congregations in California.

The visit “started with handshakes and ended with hugs,” reported one board member. Others described stories, an impromptu opportunity to provide pastoral care, meaningful prayer, good music, and “so many connections.”

The board was hosted by pastor Andrew Sampson and the Modesto congregation, which prepared meals and introduced some of the non-profit ministries that share space in the building. These include an organization that provides temporary housing for families, a community

radio station, a daycare, and several other groups—which together bring “energy and life” to the church, Sampson said.

District executive Russ Matteson and board chair Gail Heisel described the Pacific Southwest District and its varied congregations, which range from some of the largest in the denomination to fledgling church starts.

## Consultation sets next phase of South Sudan ministry

**A** consultation on the Church of the Brethren mission in South Sudan was held early this year in Nappanee, Ind., at Union Center Church of the Brethren. Participants included Athanasus Ungang, mission worker in South Sudan; Roger Schrock, Country Advocate Team member; Roy Winter, executive director of Service Ministries; and Sharon Norton, executive director of Global Mission.

The main objectives were to plan for building a headquarters for Brethren Global Services near Juba, the capital city, and to provide training for pastors and church planters in Church of the Brethren values, practices, and history. The Brethren Global Services team is led by Ungang and consists of a program manager, a woman's ministries coordinator, and several church planters and pastors.

Appreciation was expressed to Ungang for his years of service. The group acknowledged that, as the goals of the mission continue to grow, he needs the support of many more people in South Sudan and in the US to carry out and implement the vision.

The consultation decided to focus on providing temporary aid to the people who are committed to building the Church of the Brethren in South Sudan, while also giving aid to others as possible, as the country is affected by ongoing violence and attacks on humanitarian relief efforts. The strategy will be to collaborate with local partners who are focused on developing revenue-generating projects with communities, projects with which Church of the Brethren pastors and church planters can participate.



**Deana Ward cares for a young child** as part of the Children's Disaster Services response in an area of Michigan affected by a tornado. She was one of the volunteers who responded in Union City and Three Rivers after an EF3 tornado damaged or destroyed some 70 homes, killed 3 people and injured another 12. CDS volunteers also responded March 16-17 following a tornado that hit Aroma Park, Ill.

## Grants support South Sudan mission and refugees in DRC

■ \$213,000 from the Emergency Disaster Fund supports the Church of the Brethren mission in South Sudan in providing humanitarian relief in a time of escalating violence, and will help build a new church headquarters. Brethren Disaster Ministries and Global Mission staff will coordinate programming to help families address trauma, reduce intracommunity conflict, and target relief in areas where congregations are being developed.

■ \$75,000 from the EDF supports a relief effort for refugees, coordinated by the Church of the Brethren in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Communities in the DRC and neighboring Burundi have been affected by violence as the M23 rebel group has mounted an offensive across provinces of the DRC. As of early 2026, the eastern DRC was at a critical juncture that could expand into a regional war.

## Personnel

**Matt DeBall** and **Nancy McCrickard** began March 23 as interim co-directors for the Church of the Brethren Mission Advancement. McCrickard is leading the giving and planned giving portion of the work, while DeBall leads stewardship and communication.

**Mandy Park** has begun as director of development for On Earth Peace. She is a member of Brownsville (Md.) Church of

the Brethren and holds master's degrees in Old Testament and Biblical Languages. Her professional experience ranges from teaching middle school Latin to local economic development, and she has played a key role in the Church of the Brethren Gun Violence Prevention Action Team.

**Arndt Peter Schulz** began March 9 as part-time Buildings and Grounds assistant at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill.

**Janice Shaw-Morgan** of La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren has joined the Mission and Ministry Board, filling the unexpired term of Erik Brummett who resigned in December 2025.

**Tamisha Tyler** resigns at the end of this spring semester as visiting assistant professor and director of the master of arts program at Bethany Seminary, where she began as a Louisville Postdoctoral Fellow in 2022.



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## Happy 175th birthday

I read my parents' MESSENGER until we let their subscription go after my Dad's death in 2020. A couple of years ago, a friend gifted me a subscription and, though I'm now a member of another denomination, I am grateful to be reconnected every month to the community that formed my faith.

My strongest memories of the MESSENGER of my youth were posters that were included for a time. One proclaimed, "Life is good. Yea!" which I believe was a reference to Ted Stuebaker. Another read, as my memory recalls, "If birds no longer sing, how will we know it is spring?" Those two disappeared after

hanging for several years on the stairwell to my room. A third, I still treasure. From December 1971, it is the storyboard for the "LOVE" commercial that was running on TV networks at the time.

Congratulations on 175 years of keeping the denomination connected with quality writing and timely topics.

**Priscilla Keltner Skeeters**  
Strafford, Mo.

## Discussion starters for small groups

■ **Brother Moderator** Don Fitzkee has been known by various names, writes Marianne Fitzkee, each reflecting a chapter in his faith journey. What names have you been known by, and how do they reflect your past? Fitzkee "believes the Church of the Brethren's past has prepared us to face our current season of uncertainty and division." List traditional Brethren themes/values he wants to reclaim. How might those shape a reimagined church in the future? How are remembering and imagining not opposites but partners?

■ **When the church begins to hope**, it may be despite dystopia in the world around, writes Gene Hollenberg. Read a dictionary definition of *dystopia*. How did people in the Roman Empire experience dystopia during Jesus' time? How did Jesus share a countercultural message of nonviolence and God's law of love? Read aloud the bold subheads that Hollenberg calls us to affirm. Why does he focus on the church's purpose, rather than religion? Has the church "stepped away from positions of radical peace and defense of the oppressed"? Why or why not? If you answer yes, how can the church return to its roots?



## TURNINGPOINTS

### New members

*Correction: The editors apologize that some new members at Poplar Ridge Church of the Brethren were omitted from the April issue. Here is the correct listing:*

**Poplar Ridge**, Defiance, Ohio: Derek Humbert, Greg Kunesh, Hilary Kunesh, Josh Kunesh, Clint Sexton, Karen Sexton

**Brownsville**, Knoxville, Md.:

Katina Brings, Tripp Vance Rohr, Erin Schaeffer

**Elizabethtown**, Pa.: Leanne Hickey-Leach, Janice Larson, Paula Leicht, Cindy Schueman

**Gettysburg**, Pa.: Kathy Miller, Ali Musselman, Melissa Rosenbery

**Lancaster**, Pa.: Alicia Austin, Hope Dunbar, Seth Dunbar, Nancy Hess, Steve Hess, Dottie Seitz, Steve Seitz, Stephanie Stauffer, Annali Topf, Daniel Topf

**Linville Creek**, Broadway, Va.: Julian Ballew, Nicolas Ballew, Adam Beahm, Brittany Beahm, Ainsley Flora, Eli Flora, Kyle Flora, Megan Flora, Natalie Flora, Cole Grandle, Dave Jordan, Patsy Jordan, James Kidd, Josie Long, Bailey Morris, Ivan Mundy, Hannah Smallwood

**Roaring Spring First**, Pa.: Gerald Albright, Linda Claycomb, Tyreke Green, Jessica Messick, Alan

Musselman, Susan Musselman,

**Rock Run**, Goshen, Ind.: Tim and Delia Waits

**Sunrise**, Harrisonburg, Va.: Deanna Lam, Elaine Norton, Fred Norton, Wayne Orebaugh, Brenda Yankey

**Uniontown**, Pa.: Mason R. Bowers, Cameron M. Galand, Kyle W. Galand, Neal Glover Sr., Shelby L. Hall, Alexander A. Means

**West Charleston**, Tipp City, Ohio: Abby Wilson

### Wedding anniversaries

**Clowney**, Bob and Charlotte, Gettysburg, Pa., 50

**Moser**, Dave and Loretta Kay, Rohrsersville, Md., 55

**Rohr**, Tim and Jean (Higdon), Sharpsburg, Md., 55

**Wilson**, Flo and Jack, Lititz, Pa., 75

### Deaths

**Barrows**, David, 78, Waterloo, Iowa, Feb. 14

**Billr**, Evelyn, 96, Bridgewater, Va., Aug. 15

**Blatt**, Scott, 70, Reading, Pa., March 4

**Bowman**, Lois, 98, Broadway,

Va., Jan. 30, 2025

**Brumbaugh**, Lillian T., 94, North Manchester, Ind., Jan. 19

**Byler**, Donald, 88, Palmyra, Pa., March 28

**Cayford**, Elvis, 93, Seymour, Texas, March 16

**Chastain**, Kenneth, 81, Elizabethtown, Pa., Feb. 1

**Coffey**, Walter "Buzzie" Olear, 90, Bridgewater, Va., Feb. 11

**Conrad**, Paul, 96, Fairborn, Ohio, Feb. 3

**Denlinger**, Nancy, 89, Lancaster, Pa., March 12

**Dickinson**, Adrienne (Enberg), 76, Portland, Ore., Feb. 13

**Etter**, Robert, 81, Grantville, Pa., April 6

**Fisher**, Carolyn Alicia "Lish," 84, Boonsboro, Md., Nov. 21

**Gnegy**, Mildred Ziegler Bean Hartzell, 96, Somerset, Pa., July 11

**Griffin**, Gerald, 84, Harrisonburg, Va., June 30

**Heath**, Norma, 90, Harrisonburg, Va., April 11, 2025

**Kline**, Rodney, 66, Lancaster, Pa., Feb. 15

**Kruse**, Eleanor, 91, Shillington, Pa., July 7

**Layman**, Bettie, 90, Staunton, Va., Nov. 10

**Link**, Nancy Moore, 89, Mount

Sidney, Va., Feb. 17

**Long**, Donald, 90, Mt. Morris, Ill., March 3

**Long**, Edward Jr., 91, McGaheysville, Va., Jan. 27

**Markey**, Walter Jr., 97, Wernersville, Pa., Nov. 18

**McOwen**, Dennis, 78, Indianapolis, Ind., Oct. 11

**Metcalf**, Wallace, 97, Knoxville, Md., Feb. 20

**Muncy**, Barbara, 97, Bloomington, Ind., Nov. 3

**Mundy**, Jane Cline, 99, Rockingham, Va., Nov. 1

**Nicol**, Sue, 87, Waterloo, Iowa, Jan. 20

**Rainey**, Priscilla, 95, Harrisonburg, Va., Sept. 25

**Robinson**, Eleanor, 94, Lititz, Pa., May 4, 2025

**Saufley**, Al Pollard, 93, McGaheysville, Va., March 6

**Schwarck**, Evelyn, 90, Eldora, Iowa, May 2, 2025

**Shearer**, Dean, 85, Columbia City, Ind., March 25

**Sheets**, Nelson W., 91, Bridgewater, Va., Nov. 18

**Simmons**, Eva Kathryn Meyers, 101, Nottingham, Md., March 27

**Smith**, Elaine K. (Haines), 86, Frederick, Md., Nov. 26

**Smith**, Michelle Lynn, 54,

Dayton, Va., Feb. 17

**Spitzer**, Robert, 97, Broadway, Va., Oct. 29

**Thompson**, Janis, 82, Martinsburg, Pa., March 10

**Trinkle**, David M., 81, Conrad, Iowa, Dec. 24, 2025

**Umberger**, Paul C., 75, Keedysville, Md., May 18, 2025

**Van Norden**, Beatrice, 99, Hagerstown, Md., March 4

**Warner**, Gloria, 85, Hershey, Pa., Feb. 25

**Yoder**, Martha Sample, 100, Goshen, Ind., Feb. 28

### Licensed

**Spencer**, Jamie, N. Ohio Dist. (Canton, Ohio), Dec. 14

**Wray**, Michael A., Virlina Dist. (Roanoke, Va.), Feb. 22

### Commissioned

**Self**, Mark, N. Ohio Dist. (Fostoria, Ohio), Dec. 7

### Placements

**Bowser**, Harold, pastor, Madison Avenue, York, Pa., March 4

**Huiras**, Erin, pastor, Liberty Mills, Ind., Jan. 1

**Willmann**, Lynda, interim pastor, Mount Morris, Ill., March 15

To submit information for Turning Points, go to [www.brethren.org/turning-points](http://www.brethren.org/turning-points). Or send information by email to [messenger@brethren.org](mailto:messenger@brethren.org) or by mail to Messenger, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.

# In the city of God

**T**he kingdom of God is a basic and central concept in Christian scripture. Jesus taught us the kingdom of God is what we should pray for and anticipate: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10, KJV). God reigns over all of society, and justice and peace flow forth like a mighty stream.

The kingdom of God stands as an integral part of our faith and theological life. This kingdom references a radically different use of power. It is about service and humility, not coercion. But in an age of no kings, the language creates a bit of dissonance. How is a kingdom to be our goal when there are no kings?



JOHN J. CASSEL

Fortunately, there is alternative language from Revelation that is powerful and deeply significant. The “city of God” stands as a biblical way to communicate the same reality of God’s presence among God’s people.

The term “city” leads us to think about a place where a diversity of people have organized themselves into a community, allowing people to be productive and protected. The city is, by definition, political, communal, and diverse. Today, I would argue, culturally we all live in an urban world.

The city of God implies another way of living, in the words of the Church of the Brethren. The city of God is about “Continuing the work of Jesus. Simply. Peacefully. Together.” It is about living within God’s sustaining love, and embodying values such as forgiveness, generosity, and peace.

Both the kingdom of God and the city of God are a reality that is present but not fully realized. They begin, as with Jesus’ ministry, in healing, forgiving and restoring. But God’s city is not fully realized in today’s world. It will be in the future, when it will exhibit justice, peace, and no suffering. The city of God is a current reality as well as a future hope.

The Bible points us to a New Jerusalem, a new center for humanity, a place of peace and divine protection, assembled for ultimate restoration.


The city of God describes a community of people living under God’s rule. It is a place and idea based on the infinite value of each individual. This is often contrasted with worldly governance based on power or self interest.

The city of God is what life looks like when God’s rule is fully lived out in community. It is a place where God is active, and God’s people share in creating the life-sustaining conditions of justice and peace. It is a place of diversity and hospitality, as the city has 12 gates, 12 ways to enter an inclusive community.

The Church of the Brethren has long believed that the church is to be a living example of God’s reign. It’s not just a gathering for worship but a way of life. Its membership is intentional. The faith community will look different than the surrounding culture.

It is a place where the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount describe a radically different way of living. Peace and nonviolence are at the center of our lives. A shared life and economic simplicity are key. We choose to not participate in the conspicuous consumption that so marks our society. We value truth-telling and integrity; thus the city of God is marked by radical honesty, a refusal to manipulate, deceive, or exploit.

The church’s role is to be a witness to another way of living. The city of God is not enforced by the state; faith cannot be coerced.

In an age of no kings, the Christian community has a comforting and hopeful word: we are all destined to live in the city of God. Let it be so. 

John J. Cassel is a member of First Church of the Brethren in Chicago. He and his wife, Joyce, were active in the York Center Community Cooperative for more than 25 years.

“It is about living within God’s sustaining love, and embodying values such as forgiveness, generosity, and peace..”

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