

MESSENGER

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

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Light within US

National Youth Conference 2026



CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

MESSENGER

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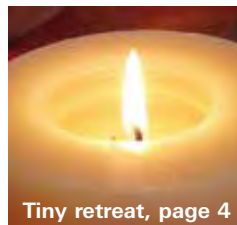
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Worship center at National Youth Conference, July 18-23, 2026.

Photo by Glenn Riegel.



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Something to offer

I went to National Youth Conference in Colorado the summer of 1994, just before starting my senior year of high school. At the time, I was focused way more on hanging out with friends and the entire once-in-a-lifetime experience than where any of it might lead later in life.

Around that same time, others in the church began noticing gifts in me and inviting me into opportunities I might not have pursued otherwise. I helped lead worship. I planned district youth events. Eventually, I served on the National Youth Cabinet. Those early opportunities led to others, and the invitations kept coming in different ways and at different points in my life.



MADALYN METZGER
PUBLISHER

I'm sure I didn't give those early invitations much deep thought at the time—but being asked mattered. It gave me a sense that I had something to offer.

So, it's been meaningful to look through this year's National Youth Conference photos while preparing my first MESSENGER issue as editor in chief. Looking at those faces, I wonder what lies ahead for them. Most of them probably don't know either. I certainly didn't.

These photos also make me think about how many generations have found their own place in the life of the church. We overlap more than we sometimes realize. We learn from people who came before us, while those coming after us are already changing what we see and understand.

That feels especially worth remembering as MESSENGER closes out its 175th anniversary. There's a lot of history behind those 175 years. But as this issue has come together, I'm reminded that the life of a magazine—and a church—is always happening in the present.

We don't know where the youth and young adults in these pages will be 30 years from now. But we know they are part of the church today.

I hope we're paying attention.

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Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford



A tiny retreat is a chance to take a break from the day and, just for a moment, lay down all you are carrying. Retreat to a sacred space of beauty, scripture, and meditation. Be blessed.

Sharing

*“The cup of blessing that we bless,
is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break,
is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?”*
—1 Corinthians 10:16

Activity

World Communion Sunday on the first Sunday of October is a chance for Christians around the world to celebrate communion together on the same day, remembering Jesus’ invitation to be one body in faith.

Remember the last time you shared communion with other Christians. What did you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? What was the most important part of the experience for you?



“Don’t let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.” —1 Timothy 4:12, NLT

“The reason the teenagers I worked with were able to make disciples of Jesus was that they believed they were the church. For them, church wasn’t something you go to. Church was something you are.”

—author and minister Jeff Vanderstelt

“‘Young people, do not be afraid to be holy!’ Fly high, be among those whose goals are worthy of sons and daughters of God. Glorify God in your lives!”

—Pope John Paul II

“Shalom is what happens when the love of God meets our most tender places.” —spiritual director and author Osheta Moore, who preached at the 2022 National Youth Conference

“Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower.” —French novelist and activist Albert Camus

A TRIP THROUGH NYC

In the puzzle below, can you find these terms associated with National Youth Conference? Words can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, forward or backward.

COLORADO	B	R	E	T	S	P	E	A	K	E	R	W
ESTES PARK	N	I	A	T	N	U	O	M	I	L	T	E
WORSHIP	C	Y	D	L	H	O	I	N	U	A	S	C
SMALL GROUP	S	O	R	A	I	R	M	L	K	T	C	I
SPEAKER	W	U	L	C	H	G	E	U	E	E	O	V
ADVISOR	W	T	B	O	N	L	H	S	S	N	O	R
YOUTH	O	H	U	I	R	L	P	T	W	I	R	E
MOUNTAIN	R	S	K	P	E	A	C	J	W	G	C	S
MUSIC	S	I	R	O	R	M	D	K	E	H	M	E
LATE NIGHT	H	T	C	K	Y	S	Y	O	F	T	A	L
RECREATION	I	B	N	O	I	T	A	E	R	C	E	R
HIKING	P	A	D	V	I	S	O	R	U	G	O	V
SERVICE	I	B	L	E	H	R	E	N	C	D	L	E
CURFEW												
LIGHT												

BY THE NUMBERS

685

Total registration (youth, advisors, and staff) for this year’s Church of the Brethren National Youth Conference, held in Estes Park, Colo., in mid-July. For more about NYC, see the spread beginning on page 8.

DID YOU KNOW?

Last month Brethren Volunteer Service welcomed Unit 340 to orientation, held at Camp Emmaus near Mount Morris, Ill. Over BVS’ 78 years, that’s an average of about 4.35 orientation units per year since the late 1940s. In all, well over 7,000 people have now served through BVS, and they keep coming! Learn more at www.brethren.org/bvs.



THIS YEAR IN HISTORY

Seventy-five years ago, in 1951, The Brethren Hymnal was published by Brethren Press. Containing 693 songs plus a variety of other worship resources, it was lovingly known as the “red hymnal” due to the color of its cover (stamped with gold lettering). It was succeeded by the blue *Hymnal: A Worship Book* in 1992.

Students receive Health Care Education Scholarships

Nine students received this year's Church of the Brethren Health Care Education Scholarships. Amounts of between \$3,000 and \$9,000 were awarded, totaling \$69,000, made possible by the Health, Education, and Research Endowment.

The annual scholarship (formerly the Church of the Brethren Nursing Scholarship) is available to members of the Church of the Brethren who are enrolled in degree programs for "front-line" or direct patient care in areas such as nursing, medicine, dentistry, mental health, physical and occupational therapy, and others. It is not applicable for public health or

healthcare administration.

Applications for the next round of scholarships will be due in spring 2027. Go to www.brethren.org/health-carescholarship.

The scholarship recipients:

Cassine Cantave of the Haitian Church of the Brethren is from North Miami Beach, Fla., and attends St. Thomas University.

Shannon Coughlin of The Church in Drive is from Frankenmuth, Mich., and attends Michigan State University College of Human Medicine.

Jesse Funkhouser of Round Hill Church of the Brethren is from Strasburg, Va., and attends Shenandoah University.

Paige Gerlach of The Church in Drive is from Baroda, Mich., and attends Saginaw Valley State University.

Jenny L. Harper of Panora Church of the Brethren/Hands of Christ Fellowship is from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and attends Lawrence Technological University.

Seth Lowey of Carson Valley Church of the Brethren is from Duncansville, Pa., and attends Touro University California College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Kara McGiness of The Church in Drive is from Fife Lake, Mich., and attends Saginaw Valley State University.

Nathan Saffer of Bethel Church of the Brethren is from Joplin, Mo., and attends Kansas City University College of Osteopathic Medicine.

James Wood of The Church in Drive is from Vassar, Mich., and attends Saginaw Valley State University.



The scholarship recipients (from left): Cassine Cavante, Shannon Coughlin, Jesse Funkhouser, Page Gerlach, Jenny Harper, Seth Lowey, Kara McGiness, Nathan Saffer, James Wood.

'Faith and Fellowship' in Kerrville

On July 3, while many were beginning their Independence Day celebrations, two Children's Disaster Services (CDS) volunteers were aiding the Kerrville, Texas, community in a very different commemoration. It was the one-year anniversary of the catastrophic flood that devastated the town and surrounding area.

Kat Fahrner and Katie Marshall joined with volunteers from Child Life Disaster Relief (CLDR) and other organizations to help the Kerrville community commemorate the tragedy. CDS responded to the disaster in 2025, sending 4 volunteers to Kerrville for 10 days after flooding from the Guadalupe River caused 139 deaths and more than \$1 billion in damage.

CDS was honored to serve again in Kerrville this year when invited by CLDR to join in providing a safe and inviting environment for the children in attendance at the memorial Faith and Fellowship Concert. Sponsored by



Courtesy of CDS

community organizations, the event was a means for those affected by the disaster to gather with friends, speak to mental health professionals, honor those who lost their lives, and celebrate the resiliency of their community.

CDS and CLDR volunteers provided meaningful child-led activities for approximately 200 children. The children painted stones with inspirational messages, colored and decorated a "Kerrville Strong" banner, painted pictures, created with Play-Doh, and wrote brief reflections on their thoughts and feelings a year after the flood. —Adam Lane

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.

A way in the wilderness

AWay in the Wilderness" was the theme for the very first District Older Adult Camp (DOAC) of Shenandoah District hosted at Brethren Woods Camp and Retreat Center in Keezletown, Va. More than 60 overnight and day participants were part of this inaugural program on Aug. 25-27.

The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the organizers are looking forward to continuing to host DOAC on alternating years with NOAC, the denomination's National Older Adult Conference.

Three fabulous days were centered around Isaiah 43:19b, "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." The schedule included keynote speakers, worship, mealtimes, workshops, recreation, excursion day options, and an evening lakeside concert by the men's acapella group Cantore.

Keynote sessions included music led by Scott Duffey with Linford and Janet Stutzman, Peggy Reiff Miller, and Paul Munday as speakers. Participants were encouraged to navigate the voyage of life with launchings, voyages, and arrivals; to consider how wilderness creates epiphany moments for new and creative initiatives to emerge; and to choose a focus in the wilderness of aging that reveals God's faithfulness and steady guidance. Current and retired district ministers led Morning Watch and Vespers around the campfire, with music led by Doug and Cindy Phillips.

Five workshop/activity blocks gave adult campers a variety of options each day. Camp staff and guest speakers led workshops on how to "get your ducks in a row" as an older adult; district and denominational ministries; tech tips and tricks; the transition from Eder to Everence; Brethren Woods history and storytelling; continued conversations with keynote speakers; digital and drone photography; and stewardship of creation. Leaders from Valley Program Aging Services shared about their programs and services and led sessions on

dementia support and basic Tai Chi for arthritis and fall prevention.

Recreation options included fishing and boating at the lake, a miniature landscape craft project using succulents, hiking, archery, a camp tour, the climbing tower, and swimming. Some participants helped to make delicious Dutch oven desserts that were enjoyed by everyone at the evening meal.

Onsite or off-site excursions included a John Kline historical tour in Broadway, Va.; visiting New Community Project's Jubilee Climate Farm and Vine and Fig sites in Harrisonburg, Va.; hiking in Fridley Gap in the national forest near

Brethren Woods; completing indoor or outdoor service projects; or simply resting and relaxing at camp.

The idea for DOAC was sparked last fall during an ecumenical outdoor ministry conference at Lake Junaluska, where NOAC is held. I was in a session about expanding outdoor ministry with older adult programming and thought, we could have DOAC! In addition to continuing and expanding the program at Brethren Woods, the hope is that other districts will catch the excitement of DOAC and consider using their district camps and retreat centers to host similar events for older adults. —**Linetta Alley**



Kevin Dabbs

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National Youth Conference 2026

July 18-23, 2026, at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colo.

“Here’s another way to put it: **You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world.** God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” —Matthew 5:14-16 (*The Message*)

For more glimpses of NYC

■ **Daily photo albums** are at churchofthebrethren.smugmug.com/NYC-2026.

■ **Video interviews with the speakers** were posted by the NYC social media, created by assistant coordinator Anna Schweitzer. Go to facebook.com/churchofthebrethreennyc.

■ **A throwback video** highlighting the **NYC Scholarship Fund** reviews decades of National Youth Conference, created by Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey. Find it on the Church of the Brethren YouTube channel.

The NYC press team provided this coverage including photographers Glenn Riegel and Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford, press room volunteer Alane Riegel, and writer and editor Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford.



Chris Grumbaugh-Cayford

685 people registered: 408 youth, 171 adult advisors, and 106 NYC staff and volunteers and other adults.

\$6,705.39 was received in 2 worship offerings: \$3,775 for the Church of the Brethren's Global Food Initiative and \$2,930.39 for the NYC Scholarship Fund.

17 boxes of school supplies were donated: coloring books, pens, pencils, and notebooks delivered to the Estes Valley Investment in Childhood Success (EVICS) Family Resource Center.

113 fleece blankets were tied in the NYC service project: 38 made on Monday, 36 on Tuesday, and 38 on Wednesday, to be distributed by Fleece and Thank You to children in hospitals across the US.

1 international youth participated from Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria): Dedan Shavah attended with his father, Elisha Shavah, as adult advisor from Nigeria. EYN member Zakaria Bulus also served as a youthworker.

7,330 miles: (probably) the longest distance traveled to NYC by two youth from New Zealand.

8,000 feet: the altitude at the YMCA of the Rockies.

4 years since youth last gathered for NYC in 2022 at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo. Held every four years, National Youth Conference brings together high school-age youth and first-year college students, along with their adult advisors.

40 years since NYC last gathered at the YMCA of the Rockies in 1986.

54 years since the first time NYC was held at the YMCA of the Rockies in 1962.



Nikie Cudde



Glenn Riegel

"If you don't remember anything else about this night, I hope you will remember this: You are the light of the world. Full stop. It's the truth."

—Cindy Laprade Lattimer, a pastor at Stone Church of the Brethren in Huntingdon, Pa., bringing the opening message. "This week is a chance to build a community together that shines... in ways that illuminate others," she added, "that affirm the divine light, the divine spark already present within you."

"May our lights grow... and may we continue to shine bright and even brighter."

—From a prayer in the opening worship service.



Glenn Riegel

“When Jesus brings light, he separates what doesn’t belong ... he separates from darkness. ... Once I’ve been exposed to the light ... I have to carry love in my heart when it’s much easier to hate.”

—**Keyon Williamson**, the Sunday morning speaker, is pursuing a master of divinity degree at Duke University Divinity School. He shared about his connection with the Church of the Brethren, having found Christ and having received his call to ministry while attending Camp Ithiel in Atlantic Southeast District.

Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford



Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford



The Longhouse: Built for NYC

One of the largest buildings at the YMCA of the Rockies, the Longhouse, was built for the first National Youth Conference that the Church of the Brethren held at the camp. At that 1962 NYC, “general sessions were held in the brand-new, barely finished auditorium of the YMCA of the Rockies,” now known as the Longhouse, MESSENGER reported. At the time, the NYC group “was the largest ever to convene at the camp.”

But there’s more to the story

“In 1959, the Church of the Brethren signed a contract to bring 2,800 youth to Estes Park in August 1962. The agreement stipulated that the entire group meet under one roof.”

The catch? When the agreement was signed, the YMCA had no building big enough to accommodate 2,800 people.

Managing director Walter G. Ruesch scrambled for a solution. First, he rented a circus tent. But then, in fall 1961—less than a year before NYC was to convene the next August—he visited a friend and benefactor of the camp, Henry Dorsey Jr. He “showed Ruesch a steel storage building on his property and then took him to see a large skating rink built by the same company. Ruesch said the pre-stressed concrete and steel building looked great but the YMCA could not afford one. Dorsey decided that the YMCA should have such a building and he would make it happen.”

With a verbal okay from the president of the camp board, Ruesch recruited an architect who was on the board to direct the project. “Not since World War II had he seen

such a large building designed and completed in such a short time. That summer, board members arriving for their July meeting were greeted by the steel framework of an enormous 100 by 300 foot building.”

However, the Longhouse was in danger of not being completed in time. “Construction crews started working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The day before the Brethren youth were scheduled to use the building, the roof and wiring were still unfinished. Somehow, the next night all 2,800 youth met under one roof.”

The Longhouse made it possible for the YMCA of the Rockies to regularly host conferences for more than 2,000 people. It also housed a six-lane bowling alley on its upper floor, and one of the largest roller skating rinks west of the Mississippi.

This year, NYCers enjoyed roller skating in the Longhouse, and they worshiped twice a day in Ruesch Auditorium, dedicated in 1980 in honor of a farsighted leader. Sometimes things come full circle.

Source: *YMCA of the Rockies: Reflections, Traditions, and Visions* by Jack R. Melton and Lulabeth Melton.

Glenn Riegel



NYCers gathered in prayer for neighbors facing the fear and uncertainty of deportation, for those affected by changes in immigration policy and enforcement, and for people seeking refuge and asylum. Led by the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy, Intercultural Ministries, and others across the church, the evening vigil offered a space for prayer, compassion, and reflection.

Glenn Riegel



Common Hymnal, a collective of Christian artists and songwriters, performs a late-night concert.

Glenn Riegel

“There’s good news. John 3:16 isn’t about perishing.... God loves you and God’s love seeks to **move us from perishing to eternal life**.... Eternal life is knowing God through Jesus.”

—Calvin Park, the Sunday evening speaker, is pastor at Brownsville Church of the Brethren in Maryland.



NYCers ‘escape’ with BVS

While at NYC, Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) and FaithX provided an escape room activity as part of afternoon and evening recreation. Youth and advisors sat at a table strewn with locked bags, BVS promotional materials, and other items to help solve puzzles in order to “escape” from the room.

The idea sprouted from brainstorming for potential workshops, largely inspired by an escape room done by Hollidaysburg Church of the Brethren. Participants were presented with a story about BVS co-director Virginia Rendler misplacing plane tickets for volunteers to get to their projects. They were given 45 minutes to find the plane tickets and match each volunteer to their project location.

In total, we saw about 165 participants in 29 groups. A vast majority were able to “escape” in time, with the record time being 16:39. Both youth and advisors had a fun experience, noting the opportunity for team building as well as an enjoyable level of challenge. We heard there were youth who included it as their NYC “high” in small groups. —Aly Heckerroth



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“We **keep choosing love** even when it feels insignificant ... because we must never underestimate the power of what looks powerless to us in the hands of God.”

—**Dianne Garcia**, lead pastor of Iglesia Cristiana Roca de Refugio and a related ministry, Nuevos Vecinos, that supports immigrant families in San Antonio, Texas. Bringing the Monday morning message, she spoke also out of her training as a mental health counselor and her study at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Stories from her immigrant congregation’s experiences of detention and deportation helped encourage the NYC congregation to extend caring and love. “We don’t need to be shy about declaring that what is happening to immigrant families right now is not the will of Jesus,” she said. “The attack on the immigrant community in this country breaks God’s heart and it should break ours.”



“God says, ‘**I will never leave you or forsake you.**’ ... We might wrestle and say, do you know what I’ve done? ... We can hear God say, ‘**Even still, I am with you.**’”

—**George Hopkins** preaching Monday evening on the biblical phrase “even still,” which he explained as the thing that remains true despite our difficult circumstances. Born and raised in Baltimore, Md., he serves a nonprofit called BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development). “God has placed a spark in you to change the world that is so overwhelming to us,” he added. “It can be in the very place of darkness that we can find the spark.”



Glenn Regel



“Lord God, let your beauty be seen through us. Lord God, let your light shine through us. Lord God, help us to remember that you died so that we can live and not just live to look good from a distance ...but live in such a way that your grace and truth can shine out for the whole world to see.” —A prayer by Michaela Alphonse.

“It’s not about the rules, it’s about following Jesus....He raised the standard ...addressing our mindset so we can **align with God’s heart.**”

—Michaela Alphonse, pastor at Miami (Fla.) First Church of the Brethren and a member of the Church of the Brethren Mission and Ministry Board, speaking Tuesday morning.

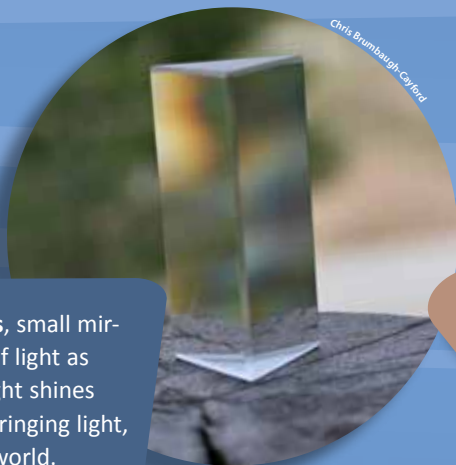
Glenn Regel



Glenn Regel



NYCers took home **prisms**, small mirrors, and other symbols of light as reminders that Christ's light shines through each of them—bringing light, color, and hope into the world.



“When we kneel down to wash feet . . . I am in a posture of humbly serving my brother in Christ. . . . That is what brothers and sisters do, isn't it? **We love each other and serve each other.**”

—Annual Conference moderator **Dennis Beckner** speaking for evening worship before NYCers joined in a service of love feast that included footwashing. He invited youth into love feast saying, “Come to this time knowing that love is all around you.”



It has not been common to hold love feast at NYC, and this year's was the first in recent memory. Youth participated in their small groups, which had been meeting together every morning. The NYC planners intentionally formed the small groups to bring together youth from various places to get to know each other and form new friendships, with leadership from designated adults.

The simple love feast included a time of spiritual preparation with silence and prayer, footwashing or handwashing, and communion. The meal, a usual element of love feast, in this case consisted of guided conversation because supper already had been served in the cafeteria.

Many people contributed to the planning, organizing, and leadership of the love feast, including Youth and Young Adult Ministries director Becky Ullom Naugle; Annual Conference moderator Dennis Beckner, who tailored his evening message to respond to NYCers' questions and reflections about love feast; Connor Ladd, the lead worship team member for the evening, in partnership with the other worship coordinators; Beth Rhodes and the volunteer youth workers, who did the practical task of getting love feast supplies—including basins full of water—to the more than 50 small groups; Erika Clary, who worked questions about love feast into the small group curriculum; and the small group leaders and adult advisors, who helped youth enter into the experience of love feast, many for the first time.



“The change we long to see in the world begins when we join God in the healing of the world.”

—Kat Armas, a Cuban-American author, theologian, and speaker, brought the Wednesday morning message. Her books include *Liturgies for Resisting Empire: Seeking Community, Belonging, and Peace in a Dehumanizing World*. She preached on Jesus sending disciples out into a world dominated by the Roman Empire to proclaim the good news and “fan the flame” of the Kingdom of God. She said, “The fire of the burning bush is the opposite of empire, that burns but does not destroy.”



During opening worship, each youth group placed an electric candle on the worship center, creating a gathering of light from congregations across the Church of the Brethren. At the close of NYC, representatives returned to choose a **candle to carry home**—ideally one brought by another congregation. In this way, the lights exchanged hands and fanned out across the denomination, carrying the spirit of NYC into congregations and communities across the church.



Inspired by the challenge to commit to Jesus Christ, **Max asked to be baptized** during NYC by Annual Conference moderator Dennis Beckner. His baptism in Glacier Creek, on the YMCA campus, took place early on the last morning of the conference. Several people joined the hike to the creek to support and welcome him as a new member of the church.



Chris Rumbough-Coyford

“We live in a world that is deeply divided and a nation searching for spiritual identity... **You are alive today because God wanted you here....** Do not fear the trials that are ahead, but be empowered by the Holy Spirit.”

—**Jeff Seace**, junior pastor at Riddlesburg (Pa.) Church of the Brethren and a former Youth Development Counselor Supervisor in Pennsylvania, brought the Wednesday evening message.

Glenn Riegel



Chris Rumbough-Coyford

Glenn Riegel



During the final evening of worship, NYCers were invited to receive **anointing** and prayer for healing of body, mind, and spirit—a meaningful Brethren practice that has blessed generations of people at National Youth Conference.

"I am light! I am light! I will shine because I am light!"

—A call and response led by **Brandon Grady**, pastor of Black Rock Church of the Brethren in Southern Pennsylvania District, preaching the closing sermon. Partially sighted from birth and blind since age 12, he told NYC, "Over time God has taught me something beautiful. There are more ways to shine than I could imagine." He encouraged youth to be themselves, as God made them. "Keep in mind, no other light is quite like yours," he said. "No other light can shine like yours. . . . You matter more than you think."

Glenn Riegel



Closing worship brought one final rendition of **"The Light Within Us,"** the theme song that had accompanied NYCers throughout the week—this time with motions created and performed by a group of youth. With lyrics by Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey and Kenneth Morse, and music by Kyle Remnant, the song premiered during the opening worship and was sung every day of the conference. Watch the closing performance in the Thursday, July 23, online photo album at churchofthebrethren.smugmug.com/NYC-2026.

Glenn Riegel

Glenn Riegel



Glenn Riegel



Several people in particular made NYC happen, with significant help from all the adult advisors, youthworkers, denominational staff, and other volunteers.

Rachel Johnson served through Brethren Volunteer Service as NYC coordinator and **Anna Schweitzer** as assistant coordinator. They worked under the direction of **Becky Ullom Naugle**, director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries.

The eight members of the **National Youth Cabinet** were heavily involved with planning and helping out onsite: **Daniel Bowen** of McPherson Church of the Brethren, Western Plains District; **Nissie Cadette** of Miami First Church of the Brethren, Atlantic Southeast District; **Kayleigh Chapman** of Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren, Mid-Atlantic District; **Zach Diamond** of Eden First Church of the Brethren, Virilina District; **Tyson Hall** of Pleasant Valley Church of the Brethren, Shenandoah District; **Katie Phipps** of Bremen Church of the Brethren, Northern Indiana District; adult advisor **Emily Van Pelt** of Antioch Church of the Brethren, Virilina District, who was an NYC coordinator in 2014; and adult advisor **Rod Matz** of Ashland Dickey Church of the Brethren, Northern Ohio District.

The **worship coordinators** included **Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey**, a former NYC coordinator and director of the Susquehanna Valley Ministry Center; **Bekah Houff** of Goshen City (Ind.) Church of the Brethren, director of events at the Community Foundation of Elkhart County, Ind.; **Connor Ladd** of Peters Creek Church of the Brethren in Virginia; and **Shawn Flory Replogle**, a former NYC coordinator and executive director of Organizational Resources for the Church of the Brethren.

Music coordinator Kyle Remnant is youth coordinator at Bridgewater (Va.) Church of the Brethren and director of Arts and Enrichment at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community as well as conductor of the Eastern Mennonite University Wind Ensemble.

Staff spotlight

Becky Ullom Naugle's passion for the faith formation of young people has led her to deep involvement with Church of the Brethren ministries. A Colorado native, she grew up on the eastern plains of the state. She received her bachelor's degree from McPherson (Kan.) College with majors in English and Spanish and a minor in English as a Second Language, and for a time taught high school English.

Illinois has been her home for more than 20 years while serving as director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries for the denomination since 2009. (Previously, she served as director of Identity and Relations with responsibility for the denominational website and a range of other communication tasks.) Overseeing programming for young people from junior high through age 35 includes events like National Youth Conference, Young Adult Conference, National Junior High Conference, and Christian Citizenship Seminar, and has been an opportunity to mentor into leadership the Brethren Volunteer Service workers and others who help organize the events. She convenes the National Youth Cabinet and the Young Adult Steering Committee, additional opportunities for leadership development.

She began serving in her local church as a teenager, stepping into expanding circles in the district and denomination. As a young adult, Naugle served as co-coordinator of the 2002 NYC through Brethren Volunteer Service. In 2019, she earned her master of divinity degree at Bethany Theological Seminary.

When she is not spending time with the faithful and talented youth, young adults, and advisors of the Church of the Brethren, she happily answers simply to "Mom!" Becky and her spouse, Patrick, parent two amazing boys, Jackson and Ethan. The family attends Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren in Elgin, Ill.

Chris Brumbaugh-Cayford



"You have seen this week how brightly Christ's light shines in them.... Anna and Rachel, what a dynamic team you have been."

—Becky Ullom Naugle, director of the Church of the Brethren's Youth and Young Adult Ministries, thanking NYC coordinator Rachel Johnson and assistant coordinator Anna Schweitzer.

Next up: Nigeria

NYC may be over, but another Brethren youth gathering is coming up. **Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria** (EYN—The Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) is preparing for its **first Mega Youth Conference, Dec. 16–19, 2026.**

Keep EYN youth and their leaders in your prayers as they look forward to their own gathering!

Christian Citizenship Seminar 2027

April 17 - 21, 2027 Washington D.C.

**Let the children come to me:
protecting children from militarized violence**

Mark 9:36 & 37

CCS 2027 will equip young people ages 14 - 19 to work for Jesus-shaped justice. Learn from and work with faith leaders, political advocates, and nonprofit professionals to recognize problems, imagine solutions, and call for effective change.

Registration opens Dec. 1, 2026.
www.brethren.org/ccs



Putting together the puzzle of National Youth Conference

by Rachel Johnson

At 7:30 p.m. on July 18, National Youth Conference assistant coordinator Anna Schweitzer and I walked onto the stage at the YMCA of the Rockies to welcome approximately 700 people to National Youth Conference.

Looking out at the youth, advisors, and staff gathered for that first worship service, I thought about everything that had brought us to that moment. For more than a year, I had described planning NYC as putting together a puzzle. Now, for the first time, I could see the whole picture.

My work on that puzzle had begun in March 2025, when the National Youth Cabinet gathered for the first time around a table at the Church of the Brethren General Offices in Elgin, Ill. Charts covered the walls with theme ideas and scripture references. We talked about our own experiences at NYC, what we wanted NYC 2026 to be like, and whom we might ask to speak.

At that point, July 2026 seemed a long way away. We could only imagine what the conference might become.

Over the months that followed, imagination gradually turned into plans—and plans into a very long list of details. There were the parts of NYC participants would eventually see, such as worship, small groups, workshops, service projects, recreation, and late-night activities. But coordinating NYC also meant working on all the things most participants would never see, like travel and housing arrangements, meetings, volunteer coordination, supplies, signs, schedules, and countless emails and conversations.

During our first site visit to the YMCA of the Rockies in October 2025, I remember doing some quick math and realizing we would be back in almost exactly nine months for NYC. Walking through the spaces where participants would worship, attend workshops, sleep, and gather made what we were planning begin to feel real.

Then registration opened in January, and everything sped up.

Questions came in by email and phone. Our registration counter began filling. Worship and music coordinators started meeting. Speakers began preparing. Volunteers took responsibility for their pieces of the conference. By spring, we could picture the Welcome Fest in action and hundreds of participants finding their way around the YMCA campus.

And then, suddenly, we were almost there.

At the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference in late



NYC coordinator Rachel Johnson (at right) and assistant coordinator Anna Schweitzer (at left) on stage at the opening worship service.

June, I heard people talking about receiving their NYC t-shirts, choosing recreation activities, and finalizing traveling plans. A few weeks later, we were loading supplies into a box truck headed for Colorado. We printed name tags and signs. Staff arrived. We set up.

For months, I had watched individual pieces fall into place. But it wasn't until that first evening of NYC that I understood what completed the puzzle. It wasn't the supplies arriving or the signs being hung. It wasn't a finished schedule or a completed planning list. It was the people.

Standing on that stage, I saw youth arriving with energy and anticipation, advisors gathering their groups for worship, staff helping people find seats, and hundreds of people ready to spend six days together.

That was the moment all those months of planning became something more than a plan.

I am grateful for the many staff members and volunteers who worked alongside me, Anna, and Becky Ullom Naugle, director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries, to bring NYC together. Each person carried a different piece of the work.

I spent much of my time in Brethren Volunteer Service helping put those pieces together. But it wasn't until that first night—seeing everyone gathered in one space together, eagerly anticipating what the next six days would hold—that the puzzle finally felt complete. 

Rachel Johnson coordinated the 2026 National Youth Conference during her term with Brethren Volunteer Service. She now serves as a part-time assistant for the Church of the Brethren's Youth and Young Adult Ministries.

Seeing things again for the first time

by Ella Hedges

This past year, I have dedicated myself to volunteer service, working full-time at a nature preschool. I expected to be teaching the students—so young and still learning how the world works—things they didn't know, guiding them towards greater knowledge and maturity. But while I consider myself a “lifelong learner,” I didn't realize just how much opportunity I would have to learn from three- to five-year-old children.

As an experiential educator, I am simply a student with responsibility: a responsibility to mitigate risks, but also a responsibility to fuel growth. I found I was able to better function in my position by changing my mindset from “guiding students to growth,” to “coming alongside the students to learn together.”

One of the most important things I have learned, or re-learned, is how to be observant: how to explore and investigate. While I have great enthusiasm for exploring, in my “adult life” that looks more like climbing mountains or whitewater rafting. What I forgot is what exploration can look like in my day-to-day life.



While whitewater rafting counts as exploring, the same spirit can also apply to looking down at my wet boots after walking through a puddle. While I have often done this, it never felt like an opportunity to be filled with wonder. Then I see a child walk through the same puddle, and they watch intently as the water slides off the edges of their boots, forming new puddles around them.

A quote by Rachel Carson frames this thought process beautifully: “What if I

had never seen this before? What if I never see this again?”

By following this line of questions, I am led to observe, investigate, and explore like a child experiencing these things for the first time.

Ella Hedges is from Dayton, Ohio. She was a member of Brethren Volunteer Service Unit 337, which held orientation at Camp Colorado in summer 2025 before going out to serve. Hedges did her year of service at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center in Little Rock, Ark.

Where could a year of service take you?

Open to adults ages 18 and older, BVS brings together volunteers from Brethren and other backgrounds to live and serve alongside others. Volunteers choose from placements with organizations in the United States and around the world, working in areas such as peace and justice, education, environmental care, community life, and more.

Most BVS placements last about a year. Volunteers begin with orientation, receive support throughout their service, and are provided housing, food, and other basic living expenses. BVS staff help each volunteer explore placements that fit their interests and skills.

A year in BVS is a chance to do meaningful work and put faith into practice, wherever it might take you.

Curious about BVS—or know someone who might be? Learn more at www.brethren.org/bvs.

Will we let AI replace what makes us human?

by Seth Spire

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become one of the most influential technologies of the modern era. It is the culmination of decades of research in computer science, mathematics, and statistics. That research has been boosted by the continuing growth in computing power, faster internet speeds, and petabytes of data being ever more readily available. AI is the present and the future, so we need to be smart about the role it plays in our lives.

Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT do not think, reason, or understand in the human sense. Instead, they function as highly advanced pattern recognizers. Given a prompt, an LLM predicts which words are most likely to follow based on patterns and probabilities learned from massive amounts of text. While the results can appear intelligent, there is no awareness, intent, or understanding behind them. AI and LLMs have no intrinsic notion of truth or correctness.

Also, these so-called “reasoning” models cannot reason. They function largely by breaking down a prompt into sub-prompts, which it analyzes to build up an overall answer in a sequential way—basically, as if you asked it a bunch of small questions instead of one big one.

These limitations (and capabilities) raise concerns, particularly regarding the potential loss of human skills. They are not humans, but we treat their out-

puts like that of a human. The potential exists that offloading writing, thinking, and problem-solving to AI will erode essential aspects of our humanity.

Similar concerns arose with earlier technologies, however. Calculators, for example, reduced the need for mental arithmetic. While people today might not perform calculations as quickly in their heads as previous generations, calculators lifted cognitive burdens and allowed humans to focus on higher-level reasoning. Importantly, math education did not disappear; we still teach addition, subtraction, and multiplication to ensure conceptual understanding.

The challenge with AI is finding a comparable balance. How do we ensure students still learn to read, write, and think critically when AI can perform a near facsimile of those tasks instantly? It may be that writing and ideation increasingly become activities people can choose to offload, but this should be a conscious decision rather than a default behavior. AI should be treated as a tool that enhances human capability, not a replacement for it—especially given that the tool itself does not understand the concepts for which it produces language.

AI is not going away. It will always be a click away (or perhaps no clicks away at all, as it becomes embedded directly into operating systems and everyday tools). Because AI is here to stay, society

must decide how to handle it responsibly. Schools may need to emphasize foundational skills earlier, reducing heavy technology use at young ages and introducing AI more gradually. At the same time, home environments play a major role. Excessive exposure to and reliance on AI tools can undermine the very skills schools aim to develop.

In the workforce, companies will undoubtedly attempt to replace human labor with AI. This might succeed in the short term, but AI’s limitations remain fundamental. It does not think, understand consequences, or care about correctness. It simply follows the statistically most likely path to produce an output, whether that output is right or wrong. It is designed to generate an answer even when confidence is low or it does not actually know what it is talking about.

Ultimately, the impact of AI on individuals depends on personal choice. Some will offload nearly everything to AI for efficiency, while others will use it selectively. Whether the tradeoff of saving time at the potential cost of creativity and critical thinking is worth it will be one of the defining debates of the AI era and of each of our own lives. 

Seth Spire, a graduate of Bridgewater (Va.) College, recently completed a term in Brethren Volunteer Service. He is currently working on a master’s degree in data science from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. This article originally appeared in the spring 2026 issue of *Bridge*, the young adult ministries newsletter of the Church of the Brethren.

“The potential exists that offloading writing, thinking, and problem-solving to AI will erode essential aspects of our humanity.”



Under their own vine and fig tree

“They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.” —Micah 4:4

Global Mission is launching a new effort to help partners in the Global Church of the Brethren Communion establish local sources of income to support their ministries.

Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree draws its name and inspiration from the book of Micah as church leaders consider ways to generate income for ministry in their own contexts. The initiative will provide startup support for locally developed projects intended to become sustainable sources of income over time.

Specific projects will vary from country to country. Some may involve agricul-

ture with startup funding provided through the Global Food Initiative. The Global Mission Development Fund will provide startup funds for other types of businesses, including retail and service enterprises.

Local knowledge and circumstances will shape each project, with plans to start at a manageable scale and grow over time.

“We hope that within five years, Church of the Brethren bodies will be able to fully fund their denominational ministries through income generated locally,” said Sharon Brugger Norton executive director of Global Mission.

The vision for the Global Church of the Brethren Communion has called for its member bodies to be self-propagating, self-governing, and self-financing. But self-financing is not the same as going it alone.

“The relationships across our global churches are built on mutuality,” said Brugger Norton. “Each church has gifts and resources to share. That’s what we mean when we say mission is from everywhere to everyone.”

Gifts to the Global Mission Development Fund can provide the start-up capital to put locally developed ideas into action, creating sources of income that can support ministry over time.

Learn more at www.brethren.org/global/under-their-own-vine. 

TOGETHER,
WE JOIN JESUS IN THE
NEIGHBORHOOD.

See what your gifts
make possible through
the ministries of the
Church of the Brethren.

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





Life sentence at the Jülich Fortress

THE SOLINGEN BRETHREN, PART 3

by Karen Garrett

In this last installment of the story of the Solingen Brethren, the six young men—Jacob Grahe, Wilhelm Grahe, Johann Henckels, Wilhelm Knepper, Johann Lobach, and Luther Stetius—were surrounded by 48 guards, walking from the prison in Düsseldorf to Jülich to serve a life sentence. They had been imprisoned for meeting privately for Bible study and prayer, which was illegal in the early 1700s in what is now central Germany. [Find Part 1 of their story in the July/August MESSENGER and Part 2 in the September issue.]

It took three days to walk to Jülich, mainly because the prisoners were unable to walk far or fast. By the time the group arrived in a village to spend a first night on the road, only 24 guards remained on duty. Maybe the six men were not as much a flight risk as had been expected.

During the second day, they became separated. One group had gone ahead, one group lagged far behind, and one prisoner, Wilhelm Grahe, found himself walking alone between and at some distance from the others. A stranger,

astounded that a prisoner was without a guard, approached Grahe to ask about the situation. Grahe confirmed that he had opportunities to escape “but the love of the truth and for my brethren keep us together.”

On the third day, they were again one group as they arrived at the fortress. The six were placed in a large area with other prisoners who were rough, and who tormented them. Even though they were hungry, the behavior of the other prisoners was so disgusting that the six decided they preferred to fast. Later they learned that Luther Stetius’ father had spoken with a guard and had given money to purchase food for the six. The men were pleased when the guard brought them lentil soup, a bit of meat, butter, and bread. They were able to gain some strength after the strenuous journey.

Over the years, other Brethren would visit and provide supplies including Stephen Koch, William Müller, John Naas, and Alexander Mack, among others. The prisoners were able to earn some money carving wooden buttons. They thanked God for his goodness and

care. They sang hymns—that is, until a corporal came and forbade them from singing. We can assume that order did not keep their spirits from singing.

The life sentence at Jülich included hard labor. They had arrived on a Saturday and were allowed to rest on Sunday. On Monday, they were lowered in buckets below ground to push wheelbarrows filled with dirt to others who then pushed the dirt out of a hole. Over the years, they hauled trash to town, helped with construction projects, or—the worst task that required standing in water waist deep—dug the muck out of the town moat.

They became trusted by at least some of the guards. On one trip, Lobach wanted to purchase something so a guard went with him further into town, which took them by a house where the commandant was standing. This caused the guard to be disciplined. The six willingly paid the three shillings the guard owed. On another trip to town, the guards disappeared. After searching for the guards for perhaps an hour or so, the group decided to return to the fortress. These

“With so much sacrifice and suffering, we wonder what kept them from giving up.”

six Brethren were certainly behaving differently than other prisoners.

The dungeons where they were housed were 4 feet below ground with walls 10 feet thick and only a small window. The window was located such that daylight came in only a few hours a day, three or four weeks a year. This darkness was quite a contrast from times they were working outside. In 1719, the summer was extremely hot. The heat and the contrasting coolness of the dungeon caused many to become gravely ill. At one point, Johann Lobach's mother came to the fortress and stayed with them to nurse her son back to health. Johann survived. However, his mother caught the fever and died there, in the prison.

'To praise Thee in suffering'

With so much sacrifice and suffering, we wonder what kept them from giving up. A hymn text from Wilhelm Knepper gives us insight into their theological understanding of suffering. The first four verses of "O Father of Love" have been translated and rhymed by James Zaiger:

O Father of Love, How happy am I,
When praising Thee
makes suffering to come nigh.
Draw my thoughts and my heart,
and set them then apart.
To praise Thee in suffering with
mind drawn nigh.

What am I, O Love, that Thou
has come to me?
Come down here to live, with
love's fiery desire.
For this I will thank Thee,
Hold to Thee steadfastly.
Then can I forsake all life's
pleasures for Thee.

O King of all Honor, it happy makes me,
That Thou, me a sinner,
has come near to be.
How can I make a start,
With my mind and my heart,
Yet always confessing unworthy to be.

Oh, what was I then, that
Thou has chosen me?

Sources for more information about the Solingen Brethren

European Origins of the Brethren by Donald F. Durnbaugh (Brethren Press, 1958), is available to purchase from brethrenpress.com.

Brethren Beginnings: The Origin of the Church of the Brethren in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe by Donald F. Durnbaugh (Brethren Encyclopedia Inc., 1992), is available to purchase from brethrenencyclopedia.org.

Brethren Trail Blazers by Mary Garber and others (Brethren Press, 1960) is out of print but may be found in some church libraries.

Source for Wilhelm Knepper's hymns

'A New Song': *The First Hymns of the Brethren* by James Zaiger (2013) is available to purchase from the Brethren Heritage Center, email mail@brethrenhc.org.

The sins I was born in, I'll
never be free.
Oh what can I tell Thee,
My sorrows lamenting,
Oh what canst Thou make
then from briars and thorns?

Verse six in literal translation:

Jehovah, O Highest! Be Thou praised
That Thou out of grace,
Hast brought me here.
I will Thee with joy,
Also praise in suffering,
Because Thou wilt give me,
The eternal rest.

To accept God's will

This Knepper hymn and the Solingen Brethren story remind us of Paul writing to the Philippians in 4:11-13, sharing that he had learned to be content with little or much in any circumstance. Or Romans 8:18: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed." And 1 Peter 2:20 reminding us that if we suffer for doing what is right, we are blessed. The Solingen Brethren on more than one occasion reminded their accusers or those guarding them that men could do nothing that God had not ordained.

Johann Lobach in a letter to his mother, early in his time of imprisonment, informed her that he assumed he would be executed. He was ready to give himself up to death for the sake of Christ. In one letter he wrote, "The more you learn to be willing to accept God's will, and be content with everything just as the Lord provides, the more He will be with you."

None of the six advocated for their release. Unbeknownst to them, leaders in

the Dutch government had learned they had been in prison for three years because of their religion. It seems the Germans wanted something from the Dutch. The Dutch said they would not agree as long as the Brethren were kept in prison.

Long story short, the six were released on Nov. 20, 1720. A horse and wagon were hired, and their belongings were loaded on the wagon along with some of the men who were unable to walk. Back home in the Krefeld area, they learned that few Brethren remained after Peter Becker led a group to America in 1719.

Johann Lobach and Luther Stetius moved into a small house where they eventually hired a quiet spinster as their housekeeper. Lobach, who expected to die in prison, lived until 1750.

Wilhelm Knepper moved to Surhuisterveen where Alexander Mack and other Brethren had relocated from Schwarzenau. There he married Veronica Bloom. They came to America in 1729 on the ship *Allen* along with Mack and other Brethren.

We know little about the other three. One hundred of Knepper's poems were published in Germany in *Geistreiches Gesang-Buch*. Only a couple copies of that hymnbook ever made it to America.

We are grateful that historians and translators continue to provide sources for us to learn stories such as this. The story of the Solingen Brethren and the courage of these six men who faced religious persecution with patience and forgiveness, challenge us to remain faithful to our baptismal vows. 

Karen Garrett is active in Southern Ohio and Kentucky District and is a longtime volunteer with the Brethren Heritage Center in Brookville, Ohio.

Judges 2:1-19

Despite evil

by Frank Ramirez

I'm a fan of alternate history novels, in which authors attempt to answer the question, "What if?" In *Lighter Than a Feather* the author asks, "What if the atomic bomb was never developed and the United States invaded Japan?" *SS-GB* is about a London detective trying to solve an "ordinary" murder under a Nazi regime following Germany's successful invasion of Great Britain. *Procurator* imagines the quality of life in 20th-century Europe 2,000 years after Pilate released Jesus and crucified Barrabas instead.

In some ways Judges provides an alternate history for Joshua, even though chronologically one follows the other. In the book of Joshua a united people sweep away all opposition and conquer the Promised Land. In the book of Judges a disparate group of 12 tribes occasionally unite when facing an existential threat, but for the most

part the enemies they supposedly eliminated are still there, and they are not going away.

This session's passage opens with the third report of Joshua's death. Unlike the death and burial of Moses, which is witnessed by no one, Joshua's burial is known to all. However, after his death the 12 tribes were not united under a strong leader. Each tribe (or several tribes) looked after their own affairs.

After Joshua

Joshua's leadership had begun with the creation of monuments to commemorate the culmination of the exodus. But this author writes that "another generation grew up after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10).

A people who failed to remember their own history would periodically stray from the worship of their liberat-

ing God, with the result that they fell into the hands of their enemies.

God, however, remembered the people, and their distress. In those times of national emergency, God called out leaders known as "judges." They were a disparate bunch. Some settled judicial disputes. Others were military leaders. Still others were charismatic prophets.

Some, like Deborah, were already recognized as leaders when the crisis hit. As a lefthander, Ehud may have been stigmatized. Samson was famously flawed, acting recklessly and frequently demonstrating poor judgment. Gideon tested God more than once. Barak seemed to lack faith in God's plan and preferred Deborah to take the fall if her leadership failed. Jephthah was emotionally wounded by his toxic upbringing, and his success was marred by a rash vow.

In the centuries that followed, however, they were remembered as a heroic

“In some ways, the example of Judges helps us interpret our own alternate history.”

group, as characterized in Sirach (a book of wisdom from the second century BC now found in the Apocrypha): “The judges also, with their respective names, whose hearts did not fall into idolatry and who did not turn away from the Lord—may their memory be blessed!” (Sirach 46:11).

Likewise, the New Testament letter to the Hebrews lists several judges and comments upon them favorably: “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Hebrews 11:32–34).

But despite the people’s promises to Moses and to Joshua to remain faithful to God, we know they will fail—as do we. Again and again. The generations failed to learn from their forebears. The people forgot their founding story and strayed. They worshiped the gods of their neighbors.

Why did they stray? Some suggest perhaps because this formerly nomadic people found themselves in a region of settled agriculture. They had to learn from their neighbors how to perform the tasks of harvesting grain and tending orchards of olives and dates—and that may have meant imitating their worship and sacrifice toward the gods of fertility.

Regardless, they were not forgotten by God. “Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them” (Judges 2:16). And while some suggest this toxic cycle of sin included an element of repentance, others emphasize that the suffering of the people is curtailed not because they repented (after

all, repentance is not always explicitly stated), but because God remembers and remains faithful to the promises made from Abraham onward.

Our alternate history

The term “alternate history” can refer not only to what might have otherwise happened, but also to different ways of interpreting what actually happened. I grew up in a church whose interpretation of history emphasized that the conversion of the emperor Constantine and the standardization of Christianity mandated by the Council of Nicaea was a triumph for the Christian faith. According to this view of history, when Rome became the center of Empire and Christianity, there was one, true, united church, until heretics emerged in the Reformation.

Anabaptists, alternatively, interpret faith history in a totally different light. The conversion of Constantine was really the fall from grace for Christianity. The Council of Nicaea’s standardization quashed the healthy debate between regional Christianities seeking to remain faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ. The persecuted church, those labeled as heretics by the state churches, were the true remnant that existed in every age.

Instead of kings, God called male and female Anabaptist leaders who did not gather armies, but nonviolently imitated Jesus and the early saints in a baptism of fire (too many times literally) and sword, willing martyrs sealing their testimony with their lives.

Today we Anabaptists, like God’s people in the time of the judges, must resist the temptation of following the false gods of our neighbors: nationalism, power, conquest. Instead we follow the Lion of Judah who in Revelation is revealed as the Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter.

Although our denominations can point to strong leadership at crucial

times, we tend to be suspicious of strong leaders backed by rigid hierarchies. In some ways, the example of Judges helps us interpret our own alternate history.

Brethren can point to a “judge” such as Dan West. Seen by some as a gadfly, he created programs like Heifer Project, inviting farmers to donate and accompany cows as gifts to a war-torn Europe after World War II. That program continues today as the ecumenical Heifer International.

Another example of a judge might be Helena Kruger, a Mennonite refugee from Russia who settled as a dairy farmer in Annville, Pa. She was sent by the Brethren to Europe because of her multilingual skills. By both charming and strong-arming military authorities, she created hospitals and housing for German children, and smuggled families out of Russian zones of occupation.

The loose confederation of many Mennonite denominations for joint relief projects under the umbrella of Mennonite Central Committee reminds me in some ways of the manner in which the disparate tribes we see in the book of Judges cooperate together at specific times. Elkhart County, Ind., is home to an unusually large concentration of many diverse variants of Amish and Mennonites. Under the umbrella of Mennonite Central Committee, they cooperate to annually raise hundreds of thousands of dollars during the annual Michiana Mennonite Relief Sale and Quilt Auction.

Reflect on your own experience. Are there mistakes in your life that are repeated? Do you sense God’s repeated presence in your life, regardless? 

Frank Ramirez is a prolific writer and retired Church of the Brethren pastor. He is a member of Rock Run Church of the Brethren, in Goshen, Ind. This Bible study comes from *Salt & Light: A Guide for Biblical Studies*, a new adult quarterly co-published by Brethren Press and MennoMedia.



FaithX wraps up summer of service

In summer 2026, FaithX brought together 51 participants from across the Church of the Brethren for trips full of service, faith exploration, and fellowship.

The summer began with 13 adult participants traveling to Northern Ireland to work alongside nonprofit partners within the Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) year-long program. A total of 33 junior high youth and advisors served those in need throughout the United States, including at a therapeutic horse-riding farm near

Hershey, Pa., and at community organizations in Winston-Salem, N.C. The summer concluded with the We Are Able trip in which five young adults with intellectual disabilities served in southern Michigan and enjoyed time together at Amigo Camp.

Registration for summer 2027 FaithX opens Jan. 6 at 7 p.m. (Eastern time). Registration is open now for the next Older Adult FaithX experience for ages 50-plus at Camp Ithiel in Florida on Feb. 21-26. Go to www.brethren.org/faithx.

Bethany opens year with strong enrollment

Bethany Theological Seminary this fall welcomed 42 students who are enrolled for the first time at the seminary or are beginning new graduate programs. Nine come from the Church of Brethren and will benefit from the new scholarship that covers the full cost of tuition for qualified students from the denomination.

The seminary expected a total of 117 students to enroll this fall, continuing a strong enrollment trend over the last few years. In May, the seminary awarded 40 master's degrees and certificates—the largest number since at least the 1960s.

Bethany also has begun enrolling undergraduates from Church of the Brethren-related colleges and universities in the UP@Bethany program, funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment. This year, new students from Manchester University are participating.

Loss of Temporary Protected Status affects Brethren

The Deportation Defense Response provided an update following termination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians at the end of July.

“Our immigrant neighbors and siblings in Christ continue to face excruciatingly difficult times,” said the report. “The Haitian community is being targeted. Haitian Church of the Brethren members in Florida have lost the ability to work, are facing significant hardships and uncertainty, and are living in fear. Aggressive immigration enforcement has hit the Haitian community in Springfield, Ohio, and two pastors in the area have been unjustly incarcerated by ICE. Unjust arrests continue across the country, and our neighbors needlessly suffer in ICE detention. Deportations to unstable countries continue, and families are separated.”

Church of the Brethren members affected, as of August:

Detained: in Atlantic Northeast District, one person from

Buffalo, N.Y.; in Atlantic Southeast District, four people from Lehigh Acres, Fla.; in Pacific Southwest District, one person from Los Banos, Calif.; in Southern Ohio and Kentucky District, one person from Dayton, Ohio.

Deported: in Atlantic Northeast District, one person from Lancaster, Pa.; in Atlantic Southeast District, one person from Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; in Missouri and Arkansas District, one person from Cabool, Mo.; in Southern Ohio and Kentucky District, two people from Tipp City, Ohio; in Pacific Southwest District, one person from San Diego, Calif., and two people from Las Vegas, Nev.; in Virginia District, three people from Bassett, Va., and three sisters from Christiansburg, Va.

Released: in Atlantic Southeast District, one person from Lehigh Acres, Fla.; in Pacific Southwest District, two people from San Diego, Calif., and one from Las Vegas, Nev.



Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) Unit 339 completed orientation on July 27-Aug. 4 at Inspiration Hills Camp in Burbank, Ohio: *(back row, from left)* **Samuel Hupp** of Manchester Church of the Brethren and North Manchester, Ind., to the Church of the Brethren Office of Peacebuilding and Policy in Washington, D.C.; **Gillian Thompson** of Carmel, Ind., to Greenhill YMCA in Newcastle, Northern Ireland; **Dominic Nozzarella** of Washington, D.C., to Washington City Church of the Brethren and the Center on Conscience and War; **Kelan McConnell** of La Verne Church of the Brethren and Chino, Calif., to Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center in Little Rock, Ark.; **William Hart** of Kittery, Maine, to Gould Farm in Monterey, Massachusetts; *(middle row, from left)* **Colleen Caylo** of Ossian, Ind., to Greenhill YMCA in Newcastle, Northern Ireland; **Leah Mack** of Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren and Elgin, Ill., to the Bernardo Kohler Center in Austin, Texas; **Josethy Perez** of Chicago, Ill., to L'Arche in Ireland; **Dimitri Janko** of Bayern, Germany, to Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center in Little Rock, Ark.; **Nico Ziegler** of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, to Camp Stevens in Julian, Calif.; *(front row, from left)* **Miriam Erbaugh** of Manchester Church of the Brethren and North Manchester, Ind., to Greenhill YMCA in Newcastle, Northern Ireland; **Elise Harter** of North Manchester, Ind., to the Shalom Project in Lancaster, Pa.; **Darek Leschber** of Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren and Elgin, Ill.

Personnel

Beth Sollenberger retired Sept. 30 as interim director of administration for Atlantic Southeast District, serving since April 1, 2024. She worked from her home in Goshen, Ind., as well as in the district. Highlights of her tenure include the district hosting a Council of District Executives event featuring multicultural ministries, and work with other district and denominational leaders to create the Deportation Defense Response. Her previous leadership roles in the denomination included serving as executive for South/Central Indiana District for nearly 11 years, interim leadership for Michigan District, and as denominational staff in stewardship education and on the former Congregational Life Team.

Jon Lucas Keller resigned on Sept. 11 as Mission Advancement advocate for the Church of the Brethren. He

joined the denominational staff on July 28, 2025, working remotely from Maineville, Ohio. He has accepted a position with a nonprofit that will enable him to serve more directly in his community.

John Fillmore has been named director of ministry for the Church of the Brethren, succeeding Nancy Sollenberger Heishman who retired in July. He has pastored Nampa (Idaho) Church of the Brethren since 2011 and has been district executive minister for Idaho and Western Montana District and a “circuit rider” for Part-Time Pastor; Full-Time Church. He holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa; a master of divinity from Bethany Seminary; and a doctor of ministry from Portland Seminary at George Fox University.

Beginning Nov. 2, he will serve fulltime in the Ministry Office, working remotely from Nampa.

Nick Beam has accepted a three-year contract to serve as district executive minister for Southern Ohio and Kentucky District, following a term of interim leadership.

Carolyn Willoughby began Aug. 1 on the interim district executive minister team for Middle Pennsylvania District, succeeding Rebecca Zeek who completed her service July 31. Willoughby is a retired minister currently working part-time in an Alzheimer’s unit at Arbutus Park retirement center in Johnstown, Pa. She is a 1992 graduate of Bethany Seminary and previously pastored Farmington Bethel Church of the Brethren.

Rachel Johnson has begun a one-year, part-time role as

assistant for Youth and Young Adult Ministries. She completed her term as National Youth Conference coordinator on Aug. 24. Working from her home in Pennsylvania, she will support programing for 2027 events including Christian Citizenship Seminar, National Junior High Conference, and Young Adult Conference, and will support regional youth conferences.

Samuel Hupp has begun as a Brethren Volunteer Service worker at the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy. His work will involve foreign policy research, analysis, and advocacy opposed to the perpetuation of warfare, war profiteering, and state violence. From Manchester Church of the Brethren in North Manchester, Ind., he recently graduated from Manchester University with a bachelor’s in Philosophy and Peace Studies.



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A hearty 'Amen'

Brian Nixon's letter in the July/August issue expressed my sentiments regarding the excellence of Wendy McFadden's work as publisher of MESSENGER. So I recommend all read it and say a hearty "Amen." We have all been truly blessed by her excellent work and certainly wish her many happy and productive years ahead!

Gloria Hall Schimmel
Sebring, Fla.

Discussion starters for small groups

■ **"Light Within Us,"** the theme for National Youth Conference 2026, focused on the way the light of Jesus Christ shines within and through each of us. Read the theme scripture, Matthew 5:14-16, in *The Message* version and in other Bible translations. How did the NYC preachers speak about this light? Find one meaningful phrase from each of their quotes to focus on for moments of contemplation or conversation. For example, "You are the light of the world," from Cindy LaPrade Lattimer; or "When Jesus brings light, he separates what doesn't belong," from Keyon Williamson; or "We keep choosing love even when it feels insignificant," from Dianne Garcia, etc. Worship leaders focused attention on light using celestial objects (stars), and everyday objects (mirrors), and more unique objects (kaleidoscopes and prisms). How does light interact with these objects? How are they different metaphors for our interaction with Christ? Looking at the NYC photos, how is light brought alive or reflected in these images?

■ **Putting together the puzzle of NYC,** coordinator Rachel Johnson lays out how such a conference is organized and tells the story of what it took to make it happen. Who are the many people and groups who contributed to NYC? What kind of planning and work did they do? What had to happen in advance? What work was needed onsite? Have you ever worked on a large event or conference? If so, what challenged you about the experience, and what did you enjoy about it?

TURNINGPOINTS

Centenarians

Beckwith, Carl, 100, La Verne, Calif., Aug. 25
Wagner, Aleene, 100, Bridgewater, Va., Aug. 27
Willey, Naomi, 100, Centerville, Md., June 29

New members

Columbia City, Ind.: Max Vanderpool
Elizabethtown, Pa.: Raphi Cassandra, Caryl Fish, Daryle Fish, Lily Fuddy, Maggie Fuddy, Alan Pederson, Sue Pederson, Annika Swank, Hailey Wile, Jackie Wile
Evergreen, Stanardsville, Va.: Stephanie Morris
Freeport, Ill.: Andrew Boettner, Jonathan Boettner
Highland Avenue, Elgin, Ill.: Margaret Johnston, Kathy Kemp, David Thacker
La Verne, Calif.: Alana McConnell, Kelan McConnell
Lititz, Pa.: Augusta Good, Jenavieve Good, Jamie Weagly
Mechanic Grove, Quarryville, Pa.: Brenda Mahaffey, George Mahaffey, Karen McCarter, Richard McCarter, Diane McMichael, Deborah Myers, Jay Myers
Mt. Olivet, Timberville, Va.: Chase Clinedinst, James Williams, April Stroop, Bobby Stroop, Branson Stroop
Mt. Vernon, Waynesboro, Va.: Sandy Campbell, Matthew Hodge, Sean Kniesley, Ellen Lawhorne
Mt. Wilson, Lebanon, Pa.:

Anthony Dinatale, Megan Dinatale, Nino Dinatale, Grayson Funk, Shawn Light, Adaiah McKinney, Mila Nanii, Liza Peachey-Vazquez, David Seitz

New Bethel, Chatham, Va.: Aiden Conner Birchfield
Pottstown, Pa.: Robin Callahan, Peyton Platchek
Rock Run, Goshen, Ind.: Frank Ramirez
University Baptist and Brethren, State College, Pa.: Michael Ragonese

Wedding anniversaries

Hoppe, Mike and Pam, Columbia City, Ind., 50
Hutchison, Bonnie and Jack Jr., Port Republic, Va., 50
Long, Mac and Margie, Mount Crawford, Va., 55
Middaugh, Charles and Reta (Nifong), Argos, Ind., 60
Miller, Barbara and P. Lee, Waterloo, Iowa, 60
Rollman, Barbara and Roy, York, Pa., 70
Ruth, Donna and Harvey, Lititz, Pa., 67
Sager, Jane and Terry, Mount Crawford, Va., 50

Deaths

Adams, Patricia S. "Patsy," 87, La Verne, Calif., Oct. 8, 2025
Beam, Gail Baxter, 79, Mount Crawford, Va., Aug. 7
Bell, Linda, Upland, Calif., March 19

Belliveau, Gladys "Sandy," 98, Lititz, Pa., May 4
Board, Lois Ann Yeatts, 87, Check, Va., May 5
Brizendine, Martha Stump, 102, Bent Mountain, Va., Aug. 15
Brogan, Daniel Earl, 88, Roanoke, Va., June 12
Brubaker, Carl M., 88, Lititz, Pa., Jan. 11
Brubaker, Zelda Lee Hylton, 96, Rocky Mount, Va., July 8
Callaway, George, 90, Charlottesville, Va., Aug. 4
Campbell, Sharon Sue, 82, Crab Orchard, W.Va., Aug. 25
Cheney, John, 85, Muncie, Ind., July 20
Conner, Myrtle Louise, 90, Fincastle, Va., Jan. 11
Dickerson, Drema Lee, 66, Floyd, Va., July 3
Dohner, Carol, 89, West Milton, Ohio, Aug. 10
Donnell, Barbara, 81, Pendleton, Ind., June 5
Duncan, Ethelene Hale, 86, Floyd, Va., Jan. 21
Ferguson, Harold "Dennis," 76, Roanoke, Va., Aug. 22
Fishel, Richard L., 84, San Dimas, Calif., July 27
Foutz, Lowell Thomas, 90, Roanoke County, Va., July 29
Gay, Joyce Ann, 86, Roanoke, Va., April 4
Gearheart, Donald Wayne, 82, Copper Hill, Va., Aug. 26
Gibbel, James C. "Jim," 88, Lititz, Pa., July 10
Gibson, Janet, 81, Botetourt County, Va., July 25

Goad, Dorothy Pendrey, 89, Roanoke, Va., Aug. 11
Harshbarger, Marilyn, 81, Peoria, Ill., May 15
Hilbert, Elmer, 89, Boyertown, Pa., July 9
Hoover, Jim, 87, Woodbury, Pa., Aug. 17
Hoover, Vera, La Verne, Calif., Jan. 26, 2025
Hubbard, Margaret Harman, 84, Floyd, Va., Dec. 31, 2025
Hutchison, Peggy, 84, Ridgely, Md., July 12
Jarrells, Donald Ray, 88, Pulaski, Va., March 8
Jehnsen, David Charles, 85, Warsaw, Ind., July 20
Jones, Doris Lorene, 94, Roanoke, Va., Aug. 21
Keith, Yvonne Teter Davis, 93, La Verne, Calif., July 11
Lee, Charlotte Marie Boggs, 98, Fincastle, Va., March 26
Linthicum, Herbert W., 88, Chatham, Va., Aug. 5
Lloyd, Patsy A., 89, Elgin, Ill., June 17
Lombard, James, 83, Floyd, Va., Aug. 16
Lynn, Sharon, 79, Martinsburg, Pa., Sept. 8
Martin, Leonard Shipman, 92, Rocky Mount, Va., March 4
Martin, Ruth A., 91, Lititz, Pa., March 7
Miller, Margaret Lee Flora, 100, Salem, Va., July 16
Moye, Iris Halterman, 80, Boones Mill, Va., Aug. 17
Neher, Marlene Marie Moats, 91, McPherson, Kan., June 12

Neill, Charlotte, Escondido, Calif., March 31
Olson, JoAnn, 93, Waterloo, Iowa, April 22
Petry, Pauline E., 83, Beavercreek, Ohio, July 19
Prillaman, Maynard Lee, 89, Rocky Mount, Va., March 5
Quesenberry, Beverly June Dalton, 96, Newbern, Va., July 14
Reed, Velma Beatrice Roberson, 99, Floyd County, Va., May 1
Rieley, Carlton Glenn, 90, Fincastle, Va., May 9
Rupel, Ruth, 99, Filer, Idaho, June 10
Sahopf, Annette, 87, Mountville, Pa., Aug. 16
Saul, Christine Peters, 95, Boones Mill, Va., March 30
Schechter, Joseph J., 99, La Verne, Calif., Aug. 3
Shelor, Claribel Fender, 98, Pilot, Va., July 19
Showers, Barbara J., 90, Manheim, Pa., Aug. 12
Smith, Odelle, 98, Earlysville, Va., July 8
Smith, Susan Wimmer, 76, Roanoke, Va., Jan. 1
Sweeney, Kevin Wayne, 60, Floyd, Va., July 6
Thomas, Clarence E. "Bill," 96, Floyd, Va., Aug. 8
Troyer, Mary Kathryn (Jewett), 97, Kendallville, Ind., July 5
Visser, Virginia, 90, Troutville, Va., June 19
Weikert, Duane, 92, Potsdam, Ohio, Aug. 5
Witmer, Brian A., 76, State College, Pa., March 5
Witt, Ruth Ann, 83, Auburn, Ind., March 2
Young, Daniel Orren, 67, Rocky Mount, Va., March 22
Ziegler, Earl K., 97, Lititz, Pa., May 29

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



Second nature

by Jocelyn Watkins

“I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.”
—2 Timothy 1:6

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds... encouraging one another.” —Hebrews 10:24-25

I spent many hours practicing the piano when I was growing up. At first, nearly everything required conscious attention. I had to count the rhythm, remember the fingering, watch the notes, and persuade my hands to move together. When I reached a difficult passage, I slowed down and repeated it, sometimes one measure at a time.

Gradually, the music changed in my hands. My fingers began to recognize familiar patterns. Passages that had felt awkward became more natural. Practice had shaped my instincts. The music was becoming second nature.

Congregations develop instincts, too. Their character takes shape through repeated choices, like how people welcome others, respond to need, share responsibility, make decisions, and offer their gifts. When someone unfamiliar enters the room or an unexpected need arises, a congregation’s response often reveals what it has learned to do together.

I see this in my own congregation, where hospitality and mission have been cultivated across many years. People notice when someone is standing alone and make room. When a need arises, the conversation turns quickly toward how we might help. These instincts have grown through years of opening doors, sharing resources, and learning to see our neighbors more clearly. No single act created them. Each one strengthened what was already taking root.

The writer of Hebrews understood that faith develops through shared action: “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,” the passage urges, calling believers to gather and encourage one another.

Consider. Provoke. Gather. Encourage.

These verbs draw our attention outward—toward another person’s gifts, toward someone who needs support or an invitation, and toward the courage we can strengthen within the community. Prayer, worship, forgiveness, generosity, and service gradually teach our hearts the way of Jesus. For Brethren, the basin, the shared table, peacemaking, and communal discernment carry conviction into embodied life.

What we repeat deserves careful attention. Familiar habits can settle in quietly. The same voices may guide each conversation. New ideas may regularly meet hesitation. Invitations may remain unspoken because everyone assumes someone else will offer them. Repetition can wear grooves that eventually feel natural, even when they no longer lead us where we hope to go.

At the piano, a difficult passage called for slowing down, listening carefully, and working through it one measure at a time. Congregations may sometimes need the same patience. We can notice where the rhythm of our shared life has become strained and begin rehearsing differently—extending the invitation, sharing responsibility, listening more carefully, or making room for another person’s gifts.

What has become instinctive among us? Where might the Spirit be asking us to slow down, listen, and learn a new response?

One measure at a time, the church we hope to become is already taking shape in what we choose to practice together. 

Jocelyn Watkins is a member of Peoria (Ill.) First Church of the Brethren and moderator of the 2026 Illinois and Wisconsin District conference. This article was adapted with permission from a reflection originally published in the August 2026 issue of *The Reflector*, the newsletter of the Illinois and Wisconsin District.

“We can notice where the rhythm of our shared life has become strained and begin rehearsing differently—extending the invitation, sharing responsibility, listening more carefully, or making room for another person’s gifts.”

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