

Leadership Team grieves withdrawal of congregations in Puerto Rico

The Church of the Brethren Leadership Team acknowledged “with deep sadness”

news received of the withdrawal from the Church of the Brethren of all six congregations in the Puerto Rico District, as of Oct. 26, 2023.

The congregations’ decisions, which were affirmed by the Puerto Rico District board, came following contacts and visits by leaders of the Covenant Brethren Church—and the six congregations have since joined the Covenant Brethren Church.

“Our decision was made after all six of our churches and their respective pastors were praying, engaging in dialogue with their leadership, and fasting for 40 days as a District,” the Puerto Rico district leadership stated in a letter to the Leadership Team. “We have understood that after observing the direction, position, and vision of [the Church of the Brethren] with respect to many of the biblical standards, our conservative principles and values have confirmed our final decision to disaffiliate from the denomination.” [translated from Spanish]

Prior to the decision to disaffiliate, district executive José Calleja Otero submitted his resignation on Oct. 6, 2023.

Denominational leaders express sorrow and raise questions

In a letter to the Puerto Rico District board, the Leadership Team expressed profound sadness for the absence of shared dialogue with Puerto Rico District leadership during their deliberations and discernment. The Leadership Team includes general secretary David Steele and the Annual Conference officers—moderator Madalyn Metzger, moderator-elect Dava Hensley, and secretary David Shumate—along with Torin

Eikler representing the Council of District Executives and Rhonda Pittman Gingerich as Annual Conference director (ex officio).

“After many years of walking together in ministry partnership, we lament our exclusion from your time of dialogue, praying, and fasting ... even after [expressing a willingness to travel to Puerto Rico to] address questions and concerns,” the Leadership Team stated. “We are not all of one mind in the denomination, but as Brethren we are called to continual study and discernment of scripture together, to pray together, and trust together that the Holy Spirit will lead us to a shared understanding.

“Despite our differences, we are unified in Christ and called to continue working at this together,” the Leadership Team letter continued. “Separating and dividing may seem like the way forward, but the way of Jesus is one of love and reconciliation—which is not an easy thing in today’s culture.”

The Leadership Team also communicated to the Puerto Rico District board that, according to denominational polity, congregations may choose to withdraw from the denomination but entire districts may not. Additionally, congregational withdrawals must be approved by the district conference. Church of the Brethren leadership will work through questions and complications related to polity and property by means of an in-person visit of denominational representatives to Puerto Rico.

Church of the Brethren history in Puerto Rico

The Church of the Brethren’s history on the Caribbean island dates back to 1942, when the Brethren Service Commission partnered with the Puerto Rico

Reconstruction Administration to establish a Civilian Public Service camp in Castañer, in Puerto Rico’s mountainous countryside. At the time, Castañer—and much of the island’s interior, rural areas—experienced severe shortages of doctors and medical services, and the Church of the Brethren collaborated with the Castañer community and government on medical and agricultural projects, including construction of a 33-bed hospital.

The island’s first Church of the Brethren congregation, Castañer Iglesia de Los Hermanos, was established in 1948. Several more congregations, fellowships, and church plants emerged in following decades, and Puerto Rico District was formally confirmed as the denomination’s 24th district in January 2014.

A time for grief and hope

The withdrawal of the Puerto Rican congregations—as well as other churches across the denomination—brings heartache to many in the Church of the Brethren.

“We mourn the loss of any of our members and congregations,” said Steele. “There is very real grief and pain when saying goodbye to those we’ve had relationships with and who have walked alongside us on our shared faith journeys.”

Separations and schisms are not new to Brethren, but neither is the history of seeking healing and wholeness through prayer, worship, and community.

“As we grieve and honor feelings of loss or lamentation, we also can hold onto our hope and the expectation of things yet unseen,” said Metzger. “That hope includes our openness to the Holy Spirit’s movement, and our anticipation of God’s transforming future for ourselves, each other, and our denomination.”

Yearbook reports denominational statistics for 2022

Church of the Brethren membership in the United States in 2022 was 81,345, according to the 2023 *Church of the Brethren Yearbook* published by Brethren Press. The membership decline continues to mirror overall declines of religious affiliation in the US, with the denomination in recent years also losing congregations to withdrawal or closure.

According to polling by Gallup, Americans who said they were members of a church or synagogue decreased from 50 percent in 2018 to 46 percent in 2022. Gallup has reported that in 2020, religious membership among Americans fell below a majority for the first time, with only 47 percent of adults belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque. This was down from 50 percent in 2018.

Yearbook numbers for 2022

The 2023 edition of the *Church of the Brethren Yearbook*—published late last year—includes the 2022 statistical report and the 2023 directory. The statistics rely on self-reporting by local worshipping communities (congregations, fellowships, and new church projects), which means figures are approximate. The

2022 statistics reflect reporting by 385 local worshipping communities, or 45 percent of the churches. Numbers for non-reporting churches are taken from the last year that they reported.

The Yearbook reported 81,345 members in 24 districts and 857 local worshipping communities (823 congregations, 22 fellowships, and 12 new church projects) in 2022, a net loss of 5,836 members over 2021. Average worship attendance for the denomination was reported as 20,733.

Shenandoah District, with 12,096 members, continued to be the largest district. The next top 5 districts by membership were Atlantic Northeast with 8,768 members, Mid-Atlantic with 7,980 members, Virilina with 7,964 members, Middle Pennsylvania with 6,539 members, and Western Pennsylvania with 5,235 members. No other districts reported more than 4,000 members.

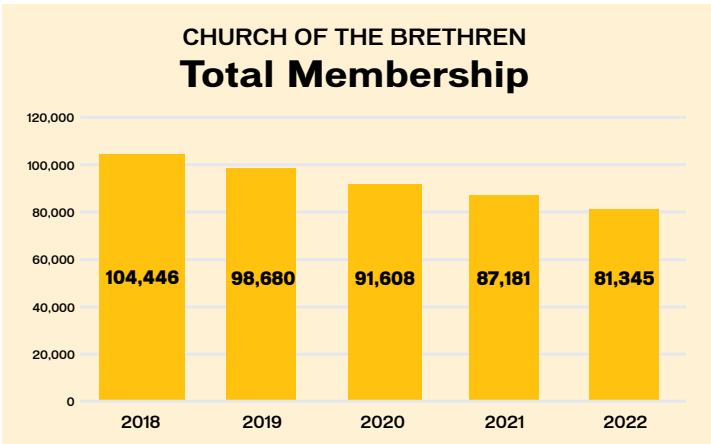
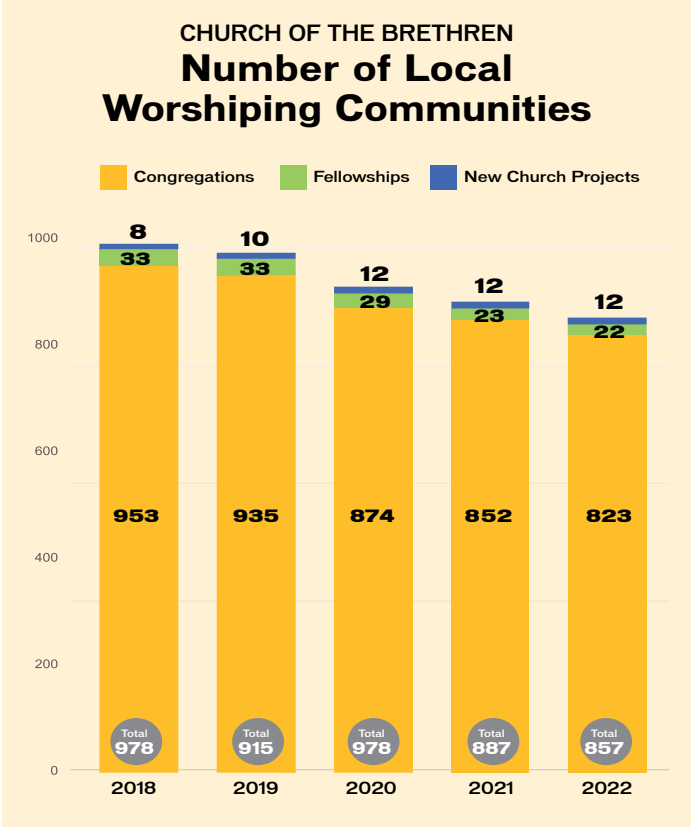
The two largest districts also reported the largest membership losses in 2022: Atlantic Northeast losing 1,733 members and Shenandoah losing 1,112. No other districts lost more than 1,000 members.

Of the smaller districts, 6 had memberships of fewer than 1,000 in 2022: Idaho and Western Montana, Missouri and Arkansas, Pacific Northwest, Southeastern, Southern Plains, and Puerto Rico.

Four districts reported small increases in membership, ranging from 8 to 19 new members.

Five districts had more than 50 local worshipping communities (excluding inactive churches and meeting points): Shenandoah with 92, Virilina with 88, Atlantic Northeast with 67, Mid-Atlantic with 58, and Middle Pennsylvania with 54.

The loss of local worshipping communities represents those that have become inactive or have closed because of insurmountable membership losses or financial difficulties, and those that have left the denomination.



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