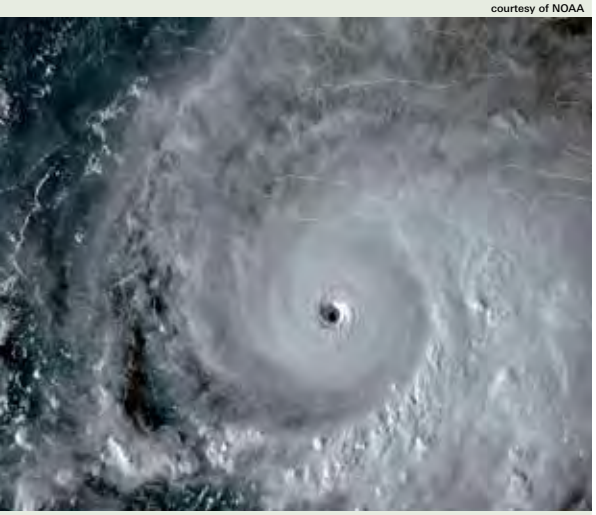
courtesy of NOAA



A satellite image of Hurricane Melissa

Church aids partners in hurricane's path

Hurricane Melissa caused extensive damage in Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba in October. Brethren Disaster Ministries worked with local partners and Global Church of the Brethren Communion members to coordinate an initial response.

In Haiti, church leaders assessed the storm's impact. Unify Christian Church of the Brethren in Miami, Fla., collected donations of food and hygiene items.

In Jamaica, Brethren Disaster Ministries paid the cost to ship donations collected through Church of the Brethren pastor Dennis Webb and the Caribbean-American Family Network.

In Cuba, a $5,000 Emergency Disaster Fund grant provided initial relief to a group of pastors and congregations connected to the Church of the Brethren in Venezuela.

Longer-term response plans will focus on needs in Haiti.

Mission and Ministry Board approves budget for 2026

The Mission and Ministry Board held a special meeting by Zoom on Nov. 24 to approve the 2026 budget for the denominational ministries. The board approved a total budget for all denominational ministries of $7,913,780 income and $7,954,240 expense, with an anticipated net expense of $40,460. For the Core Ministries, the board approved a budget of $5,453,000 income and $5,453,260 expense.

The decision represented a reduction of $102,000 in anticipated net expenses in Core Ministries since October, when the board had approved a parameter of $5,555,000. Treasurer Ed Woolf explained that staff worked to make additional reductions to lower anticipated expenses. He noted that in 2026, 56 percent of income will come from internal sources such as quasi-endowments, savings, and investments, as a trend of decreasing giving from congregations is expected to continue.

Surveys reveal hopes for children's faith

Surveys carried out by Brethren Press and MennoMedia through Shine Everywhere and a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. gathered information from congregations in Shine's publishing partner denominations—the Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA, and Mennonite Church Canada—as well as Shine customers from other denominations. Shine received 264 responses from congregations and 254 from families, with an additional 62 responses to more in-depth "Families Growing Faith" mini surveys.

Results revealed that these families "place a high-priority on regular church attendance and are looking for ways to increase faith-related engagement with their children outside of church." Nearly 85 percent of parents reported being "very confident" or "confident" in providing faith-forming experiences to their children at home. Parents want resources that are easily accessible and simple to use while representing diverse cultures and experiences. Challenges included a struggle with conflicting priorities and feeling overwhelmed by the pressure of nurturing faith development at home, despite recognizing its importance.

Primary concerns from congregations included a decline in engagement among youth and children, the struggle to maintain enough volunteers, and inconsistent attendance. More than 40 percent of churches report their attendance has declined over the last 5 years, with most having an average worship attendance of 100 or fewer.

One of the highest priorities for congregational leaders and families is a deep sense of belonging. There is a drive to promote intergenerational relationships through worship practices, extend a sense of community beyond worship, and provide an environment in which children find mentors and friends who share similar faith values.

Shine is creating resources in response. A cohort of 18 congregations for 2025-2026 is receiving at-home faith formation resources to distribute to families. In turn, they will provide feedback for the next round of resources. Find out more at https://shineeverywhere.com.

New initiative will focus on rural areas, small towns

Through the Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church connections in the Ministry Office, a partnership with Ashland Seminary has resulted in a grant of almost $1 million as a "pass-through partner" within the Rural and Small Town Initiative funded by Lilly Endowment Inc.

The Church of the Brethren's Rural and Small Town Initiative program will be housed in Discipleship and Leadership Formation, with oversight by executive director Nate Polzin and staffing by Richard Wehrle. This new grant is geared to both pastors and congregations.

Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church continues in the Ministry Office with oversight by director Nancy Sollenberger Heishman and staffing by Ryan Braught. It is entering a sustainability phase, having received a Lilly sustainability grant.

District executive joins delegation to Palestine

Andy Hamilton, district executive minister of Southeastern District, traveled to Palestine Nov. 9-17, with a delegation from Churches for Middle East Peace.

"The delegation was briefed concerning the ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza and visited with Palestinian communities in the West Bank that have experienced ongoing threats of violence from Israeli settlers," he reported.

The delegation met with officials from the World Council of Churches accompaniment program and participated in a gathering at Bethlehem Bible College where Palestinian Christian leaders presented the 2025 Kairos 2 document "A Moment of Truth: Faith in a Time of Genocide."

Personnel

Ryan Braught began Nov. 17 as an independent contractor to manage Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church for the Ministry Office. He has been a "circuit rider" for the program since 2003. He is a multi-vocational minister and pastor of Veritas Church of the Brethren in Lancaster, Pa.

Aly Heckeroth began Oct. 13 as FaithX assistant coordinator, serving at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill. She is in her second year of Brethren Volunteer Service, having served for a year at Highland Park Elementary in Roanoke, Va. She is a member of Messiah Church of the Brethren in Kansas City, Mo.

Bethany Kasten began Nov. 3 as part-time office assistant for Discipleship and Leadership Formation at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill. She previously was a senior paralegal at Bott and Associates, Ltd. in Rolling Meadows, Ill.

Greg Davidson Laszakovits began Jan. 1 as interim district executive minister for Northern Plains District. He lives in Elizabethtown, Pa., and will serve half-time in a hybrid working style and will travel as needed. He has pastored Elizabethtown (Pa.) Church of the Brethren for 15 years and also has been an interim pastor. He served the denomination as director of the former Washington Office (now the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy) and as mission coordinator of Igreja da Irmandade-Brasil (the Church of the Brethren in Brazil). He owns and operates GDL Insight, which offers coaching, training, and consulting services.

Don Mitchell has begun in the newly created role of director of Intercultural Ministries for Atlantic Northeast District. He had been director of Church Development for the district since August 2006.

Sarah R. Radcliff began Nov. 17 as manager of Brethren Press operations, with responsibility for the functions of customer service and shipping at the General Offices in Elgin, Ill. She has more than 13 years of experience in managing projects and processes, with previous experience at JPMorgan Chase and Thermo Fisher Scientific. She has studied at the University of Notre Dame and at Judson University. She and her family attend Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren in Elgin, where she has been church office administrator.

Michael Scalzi retired Dec. 31 after three years as program assistant for Children's Disaster Services. He worked with CDS since Nov. 9, 2022. His contributions included work connecting with volunteers and maintaining volunteer and program information. He is a member of Westminster (Md.) Church of the Brethren.

Richard Wehrle on Nov. 17 began as program manager for the new Rural and Small Towns Initiative in Discipleship and Leadership Formation, after having been program manager for Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church.

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