

Church of the Brethren CALL OF CONSCIENCE



SESSION 5 Taking a Stand

The Historic Peace Position of the Church of the Brethren

Background for leaders

Brethren words on war and peace

The memory of the horrible Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was still strong in the minds of the early Brethren in Germany. It was a war of Protestants against Catholics and it was brutal. In his book *Biblical Pacifism*, Dale Brown describes the war as “one of the worst in history.”

The psychological impact on its survivors and their posterity was immense. Some estimates have the population decreasing by three quarters and show the loss of livestock and wealth to be even greater. Anarchy was common in much of Germany. There were many areas of Germany which were practically depopulated. . . . Unfortunately, the end of this war did not bring peace to the Germans. The remainder of the seventeenth century was a turbulent and unsettled time. The peasants grew weary of armies plundering their fields, as in 1688 when the armies of Louis XIV swept over the Palatinate. (13-14)

From the very beginning, Brethren rejected war. Brethren historian Rufus Bowman attributes this early belief not only to these experiences with the destructiveness and brutality of war, but also to the teachings and example of Jesus who advocated love of enemies and suffered at the hands of his own enemies without revenge. In the first example of writing we have from Alexander Mack (a long letter responding to forty

Purpose of this session

- Introduce youth to the historic Church of the Brethren peace position
- Review Annual Conference statements on peace
- Connect youth with adults in the congregation who are conscientious objectors and peacemakers
- Help youth identify adults who will write letters of recommendation on behalf of the conscientious objector

Ahead of time

Cut apart one copy of “1775 to Today” and place the strips into a basket.



questions about his religion from a local authority), he said firmly that “No [Ana]Baptist will be found in war” (*Basic Questions*, response to question 40). Throughout our history, the Brethren as a denomination have held to the belief that war is sin and that Jesus teaches us another way.

The Brethren have held this position through many conflicts: The French and Indian wars, the Revolutionary War, the massacre of Brethren by Indians at Morrison’s Cove in Pennsylvania, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, and wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Brethren have also opposed military oppression of small countries and any kind of violence and injustice against people anywhere.

Brethren have recorded this commitment to peace and justice at various times in official statements made at the church’s Annual Conferences, beginning as early as 1785. See “1775 to Today” for quotes from a number of statements.

A Connect

Show “All War Is Sin,” a short video posted on the “Call of Conscience” web page.

B Set up the session

Ora Huston’s poem “All War Is Sin” sums up dramatically what the Church of the Brethren as a denomination believes about war. While many beliefs and attitudes change over time, the Brethren have held this belief consistently throughout our 300-year history.

Ask youth to think for a moment about their religious convictions and consider when they can use absolutes, such as “all,” “every,” “never,” or “no matter what.” Write these sentence starters on the board:

“God, you are *always*. . . .”

“*No matter what*, we. . . .”

“*Each* time I fail, I. . . .”

Lead a prayer that begins with a time of silence and is followed by each person completing one of the sentence starters. Close by saying the Lord’s Prayer together, and ask participants to notice especially the words “our” and “us” in the prayer. (If you think your group will not know the words, print out the words ahead of time or find it in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, p. 731).

Materials you will need

- Copies of “1775 to Today” plus one extra copy to cut apart
- Tape or thumbtacks to post quotes on timeline
- Copies of “Call of Conscience” for session 3
- Copy of the “Goshen Conference” article for yourself; copies for participants are optional
- One copy of the “Ten Commandments/Beatitudes” page
- Roll of newsprint or craft paper and markers
- Copies of the sample letter
- Copies of the “Questions about Conscientious Objection” worksheet
- Copies of “CO Checklist”



C Historical study

Place the basket of Annual Conference quotations in the middle of the group. Identify a bulletin board or wall where a rough timeline can be developed, with the far left being 1775 and the far right behind “today.” Have youth take one slip at a time and thumbtack or tape it to the timeline in order. Continue until all the slips are posted. Depending on the time available, have them read some or all of the quotations as they post them. Afterwards, give each participant a copy of the list to keep in their journals.

D Things to think about and do

1. Restage the Goshen Conference. Using the *Brethren Encyclopedia* article, tell youth what happened in 1918 at the Goshen Conference. Keep in mind that in 1918 there was no provision for conscientious objection. Everyone was subject to the draft. Once people were drafted, objectors could request “noncombatant” positions in the military, such as stretcher-bearers or cooks or medics, but those positions were not guaranteed. Have youth take on roles of Annual Conference officers (as many position as needed: moderator, secretary, delegates) and reenact the situation in the present day. Use questions like these:

- We are categorically opposed to war. Will we counsel our young people to refuse to appear for induction into the military?
- What might be the consequences of civil disobedience (or holy obedience) and should consequences influence our decision to resist or comply?
- Who will suffer the consequences?

In 1918 the government threatened to prosecute the officers of the conference and the authors of the statement. Continue the present-day reenactment by debating whether to back down or possibly face prison and enormous fines. Finally, talk briefly about whether the leaders did the right thing in the real situation. Did the church fail in 1918? Did anything good come out of the actions of the Goshen Conference?

2. Review the 1934 statement. This is the statement in which the church declared that “All war is sin.” Have youth break into pairs to find definitions of the word “sin” in a computer dictionary or Bible dictionary. Challenge them to find variations in definitions, such as “violation of God’s laws,” “rejection of God or God’s will,” “separation from God.” On newsprint or chalkboard, write the definitions they find. Then in a group discussion ask:

- Which definition of “sin” sounds the most convincing to you? Why?
- According to the definition you chose, why is war sin?
- What do you think is the consequence of this sin?
- Why don’t all Christians believe that war is sin?

What we have said

Find the full text of Church of the Brethren statements on war at <http://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/>. Find particular Annual Conference statements by year or by title.



Other ideas

Organize a panel discussion at your church, with conscientious objectors and veterans talking about their experiences during war time. Or organize a coffeehouse with music and readings from poetry, excerpts from novels, portions of Annual Conference statements, or parts of the youth journals. Videotape one-on-one questions with adults and show the interviews in a montage.



3. Conscientious objection and holy obedience. Put up a graffiti wall using a roll of craft paper or a roll of newsprint. Provide markers and ask youth find the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17 and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Note that Matthew closes the Beatitudes by saying, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Following God is dangerous and rewarding at the same time.

On the graffiti wall, have youth list the Ten Commandments one by one, using the list on the “Ten Commandments/Beatitudes” handout. Then ask them to list the Beatitudes (blessings). One list is a list of the things we should not do and the other is a list of the things we should do. Stand back from the two lists and ask youth to see if they see any pairs of dos and don’ts, such as “You shall not commit murder,” and “Blessed are the peacemakers” or “You shall not covet” and “blessed are the poor.” On the graffiti wall, have them draw lines from each beatitude to its pair among the commandments.

4. Letters of reference. Encourage youth to write to two adults asking for letters of reference to include in a CO file. They can write their own requests or use the “Sample Letter” handout as a guide. Help them each identify adults, such as pastors and teachers, who could write letters testifying to their beliefs about peace, war and violence. They might consider adults they respect but disagree with. Someone with an opposite point of view, but who respects a person of conviction, may write a more convincing letter than someone with whom a person always agrees.



Closing

Distribute copies of the “Call of Conscience” handout.

1. Ponder. Invite participants to consider this question between now and the next session: “The Church of the Brethren has stood for peace for more than 300 years. How does this affect my understanding of the Christian faith?”

2. Pray. “God of peace: In a world that practices war, teach us another way of living. Teach us holy obedience. Amen.”

Assignments

In session 4, youth will begin compiling their files. Distribute copies of the “CO Checklist” and the “Questions about Conscientious Objection” worksheet and remind them to work on:

- Responses to the three questions from Selective Service
- Letters of recommendation
- Supporting documents, such as copies of baptismal certificates, clippings from newspapers, term papers on a related topic

Also ask youth to bring copies of any military recruitment advertising that they have received.