

Executive Committee & General Secretary's Report on Foreground Vision Initiative #4 and  
Recommended Declaration of Priorities for Ministries  
to Align with Strategic Plan/Background Vision Strategies  
Spring, 2021

## INTRODUCTION

The General Secretary and Executive Committee ("EC"), across many meetings and months, have carefully and prayerfully undertaken the task of Foreground Vision Initiative #4 (Looking for Lamps Full of Oil/ Organizing Structure), to assess how present program and resources align or do not align with the emphases and needs of the Strategic Plan's Background Visions.

The criteria used to make this assessment consist primarily of the language and direction of the Strategic Plan ("the Plan") and Background Visions ("BV's") themselves, informed by multiple important inputs, including:

- \*recognition of how early board conversations about future programmatic direction, which took place alongside denominational Compelling Vision discussions, helped shape the board's subsequent consideration of the Plan;

- \*EC's consensus understanding of, and enthusiasm for, where the BV's words and phrases point as the Spirit speaks through them, an understanding advanced by the full board's engagement of the BV's, which helped further to flesh out their meaning;

- \*the General Secretary's overview of each department's current areas of involvement and functioning;

- \*executive-level staff's own descriptions of each department's current areas of ministry involvement and functioning;

- \*recognition that "we can't do it all," that the portfolios of a gifted staff are full, that we must prioritize and prune ministries under the Plan in order to focus energy and efforts and do extremely well what we're called to in this time; and

- \*acknowledgement that our context includes numerical decline in the church and brokenness in both the church and surrounding society, as well as lingering unknowns from the pandemic, but that our context includes more abundantly the presence and mercy of God, Christ's commissioning and empowerment to make disciples, and the high calling to be ministers of reconciliation.

After recounting some essential background to this task, the following report recites highlights from the assessment and concludes with the recommendations of the Executive Committee and General Secretary declaring priorities to align ministries with the Plan.<sup>1</sup> This is in furtherance of the Mission and Ministry Board's governance role, to set direction for the organization.

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<sup>1</sup> For quick reference, the Recommended Declaration of Priorities may be found on page 10.

## BACKGROUND

The Mission and Ministry Board (“MMB”) was pivoting towards beginning a new strategic planning process in the same season as the Church of the Brethren’s early Compelling Vision (“CV”) conversations. One question raised in the 2019 Annual Conference CV conversations invited participants to wonder what might be the next big idea for the Church of the Brethren. In October 2019, MMB did its own brainstorming on this question and also engaged data from those CV conversations. In March 2020, MMB affirmed that the following subject clusters stood out from the board’s next-big-idea discussion the previous fall: race relations, equipping people for personal faith sharing, and expanding conflict resolution to the entire denomination. In the same March 2020 meeting, MMB appointed the Strategic Plan Formation Team, which moved into further and deeper engagement with CV data and discerned a proposed plan to bring for MMB’s consideration. At its June 2020 meeting, MMB approved the Plan, which sets forth:

*Beyond the Horizon Vision: JESUS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD*

*Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.*

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*Background Vision Strategy #1: PURSUE CHRIST’S CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP*

*We will create and sustain a flexible framework for formation that nurtures innovative, adaptable, and fearless disciples who more fully articulate their faith and embody the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ.*

*Background Vision Strategy #2: EMBODY THE BIBLICAL COMMAND TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS*

*We will create and curate tools and resources that equip our congregations and members to cultivate empowering and mutually transformative relationships with their neighbors within and beyond their specific context.*

*Background Vision Strategy #3: SEEK GOD’S RACIAL JUSTICE*

*We will identify and critique, confess and repent of the whiteness and racialized hierarchy that have been integrated into Brethren identity, and we will dismantle those barriers and structures that prevent us from becoming a community of all nations, all people, all languages living together in the presence of God.*

*Background Vision Strategy #4: RECLAIM NEW TESTAMENT MODELS OF GIVING*

*Committing to both organizational mission and ministry with our neighbors, we will transform our collective culture and giving practices to reflect the just and equitable distribution of God’s resources to eradicate needs as embodied by the early church.*

After beginning the work of Foreground Vision Initiative #4 (“FVI4”) in the fall of 2020 to hold present program and resources up to the Plan for review, the General Secretary and EC saw the need to enlist the full board in an additional engagement with the BV’s to flesh out further what they mean to the board and to gauge whether EC’s work-to-date was on track. MMB met by Zoom on December 8, 2020 and shared in that further engagement.

Equipped with the various inputs (EC's own insights and inspiration from engaging the BV's, MMB's additional engagement with the BV's, the General Secretary's overview of present program, etc.), EC has proceeded deeper into its discernment in winter and spring meetings and now reports the following highlights, concluding with EC's recommended priorities for aligning ministries with the Plan and its BV's.

## **ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS**

This review and report reflect current structure. The General Secretary will have room to reorganize structure to help drive the identified priorities under the Plan.

### Discipleship Ministries

The Plan's Beyond the Horizon Vision and Background Vision Strategy #1 ("CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV") make direct reference to calling, equipping, forming, and nurturing disciples in response to the call of Christ. Discipleship is central to the Plan. Not surprisingly, there are a variety of ministries in this department that line up well with the Plan's emphases, from aiding congregational practices of worship, prayer, and discerning spiritual gifts, to helping congregations develop mission strategies, from organizing church planting conferences, to coordinating age group events and providing leadership development opportunities.

At least four areas rise to the surface, though, when considering what must receive heightened emphasis to better match the Plan's direction.

First, our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV specifically names the priority of nurturing disciples "who more fully articulate their faith" in the context of the Jesus in the Neighborhood Vision. Discipleship Ministries presently lacks a substantial initiative in this area. Present program is reactive rather than proactive, more piecemeal than comprehensive. While staff are available upon request to do workshops or connect congregations or members with outside resources, there is not a prominent, broad, Brethren-driven and distinctive framework for equipping evangelism, for forming members to get in touch with their own faith story, to discern and to practice articulating Christ's impact on their lives, to give voice to their Biblical hope. In faithfulness to the Great Commission and in the context of church decline, our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV helpfully reveals the need for intentional realignment of resources and skills to build a more robust program that helps form disciples who make disciples, for faith-sharing in word, in addition to action.

Secondly, the phrase "holistic peace of Jesus Christ" figures prominently in our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV. "Holistic" conveys that the peace which Christ brings extends from our relationship with God to our relationships with each other and with neighbor. In the context of brokenness within the church and in the surrounding society, our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV helps reveal the need for our "peace church" to offer a trustworthy and robust ministry to heal and reconcile relationships.<sup>2</sup> While Discipleship Ministries again has workshops available upon request on conflict transformation, the present age and

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<sup>2</sup> This assessment and the associated item in the Declaration of Priorities for Ministries are not intended to duplicate or displace the Ministry of Reconciliation within On Earth Peace but to spur the development of a complementary conflict transformation program and weave a conflict transformation emphasis into the fabric of our ministries.

the Plan call for more, including the intentional construction of a network of members who understand the dynamics of conflict and who are called to serve in a ministry bringing healing to our brokenness.

Thirdly, Intercultural Ministries is listed as one of about a half dozen categories within Discipleship Ministries. This may be contrasted with the Plan, which elevates “Seek God’s Racial Justice” to one of four main ministry directions as its very own Background Vision Strategy #3 (“GOD’S RACIAL JUSTICE BV”). This is not to say that Intercultural Ministries and Seeking God’s Racial Justice are one and the same or that Intercultural Ministries is exclusively about Seeking God’s Racial Justice. But it does help lay bare that the Plan calls for such a heightened attention to Seeking God’s Racial Justice that its scope will extend well beyond one sub-department and staff person.<sup>3</sup>

Fourthly, Background Vision Strategy #2 (“LOVE NEIGHBORS BV”) calls for equipping congregations to cultivate empowering and mutually transformative relationships with neighbors. Among other things, this will involve aiming resources toward new tools to discover our neighborhoods and increasing efforts to facilitate story swaps among congregations about various outreach initiatives, methods, and lessons. In addition, the Beyond the Horizon Vision’s phrase “relationship-based neighborhood engagement” drives EC’s sense that events put on principally by Discipleship Ministries need to be conceived in ways that make them more far-reaching than an insular meeting of Brethren. One avenue worthy to explore is that of regionally-based conferences.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, making larger commitments to these areas may well mean realignment of others, or even blessing the end of some areas of involvement that have had their season but now give way to greater priorities. Transferring care of pastors from the current Discipleship Ministries to the Office of Ministry and transferring stewardship education and emphasis from the current Discipleship Ministries to Mission Advancement (discussed later) are two realignments that will help create capacity for heightened emphases prompted by the Plan.

### Global Mission

Global Mission advances multiple Background Vision Strategies and generates excitement across a wide segment of our denomination.

Our LOVE NEIGHBORS BV sees the Brethren connected in mutually transformative relationships with neighbors both within and beyond our immediate contexts. Global Mission takes us beyond our immediate contexts to see and share Jesus in the wider neighborhood of the world and to experience transformation. Continuing progress towards a Global Brethren Communion carries promises of even deeper relationships and wider collaboration, including perhaps identifying and undertaking together where we go next in the world with the good news of Jesus. The development of country advisory teams has growing potential to get more people and congregations connected with global mission and in turn to transform more people and congregations into those with greater passion for local outreach also.

When our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV speaks of forming courageous disciples who embody the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ, it is easy to see that we have much to learn from our

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<sup>3</sup> Early efforts to develop a Brethren version of the Evangelical Covenant Church’s Sankofa Journey are promising.

<sup>4</sup> The pandemic-related adaptation of FaithX (formerly workcamps) to regional settings is an example of creative rethinking which could prove helpful here.

brothers and sisters in Nigeria and elsewhere. While our GOD'S RACIAL JUSTICE BV undoubtedly summons us to seek God's racial justice in our U.S. context, this holy work is enhanced by the intercultural lessons learned from our attentive listening and vulnerable sharing in our global mission relationships, and the image this keeps before us of a community of all nations, peoples, and languages living together in the presence of God. And as Background Vision Strategy #4 ("NEW TESTAMENT GIVING BV") pushes us to reclaim New Testament models of giving, Global Mission can lead us into a culture where people are viewed more through the lens of what they give than what they acquire, accumulate, or consume.

The Global Food Initiative ("GFI") is a self-funded ministry which operates from contributions specifically made to it. But, GFI resides within the shared vision of Global Mission. GFI helps advance multiple BV's, also in ways that match the Plan's emphasis on relationship-based engagement. GFI's international work to address hunger and facilitate agricultural development is largely focused on our global Brethren partners and expresses our LOVE NEIGHBORS BV well. GFI's multi-year developmental approach internationally, as well as GFI's support of US congregations' community gardens, spur relationship-building and mutuality with nearby and far away neighbors. At the same time, there likely is room for GFI to connect congregations further with its international work. Maybe there are untapped lessons about the differences between giving a fish, teaching to fish, and opening access to the pond that will further our understanding of ethnic economic barriers in our closer contexts and thus help us live more deeply into our GOD'S RACIAL JUSTICE BV.

#### Office of Ministry

When our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV speaks of a "framework for formation" that nurtures disciples, this necessarily includes leadership development. The work of the Office of Ministry aligns with this as it supports district work to call, train, credential, place, and care for ministers. At the same time, some areas warrant further exploration.

Some districts and congregations struggle at times with effective ministry placement, even where ripe for discipleship and growth. Our NEW TESTAMENT GIVING BV presses the question of what it might look like programmatically for segments of the church with more resources to provide support. While this may require the Annual Conference in the longer-term to reconsider district structure, in the near term a pilot project developed in consultation with the Council of District Executives and inspired by early church giving practices could begin to stimulate transformation. Such a project could draw upon lessons being learned during the Part-time Pastor, Full-time Church program whose grant-funding ends in a couple of years.

Further, the Office of Ministry is seen as a likely collaborator in advancing our GOD'S RACIAL JUSTICE BV. Attentiveness to historical and present racial barriers that have contributed to a shrinking pool of pastoral candidates, and tactful advocacy in response, will be important contributions.

Finally, as noted in the Discipleship Ministries section above, realigning those care of pastors programs presently lodged in the current Discipleship Ministries into a next version of the Office of Ministry likely would contribute to the greater whole under the Plan.

## Service

Service is in the Brethren heart. Our LOVE NEIGHBORS BV speaks of equipping members for “mutually transformative relationships.” Brethren Disaster Ministries (“BDM”), Children’s Disaster Services (“CDS”), Brethren Volunteer Service (“BVS”), and FaithX (formerly workcamps) each do this, offering service experiences that meet human needs in a variety of neighborhoods and circumstances and in turn impacting the volunteer in profound ways. Whether they are youth, young adults, older adults, or couples, participants often end up engaged in service for life, including in the congregational context. Each of these ministries has a continuing place of priority under the Plan.

BDM and CDS are self-funded through the Emergency Disaster Fund. CDS has become a signature Brethren ministry which exemplifies and inspires neighbor love. BDM has brought volunteer groups with diverse theological perspectives together for shared service, which at times has resulted in increased respect and trust. This furthers our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV’s aims of transformation and embodying the holistic peace of Jesus Christ. Even more intentional efforts should go towards creating such opportunities. FaithX affords a similar chance for mostly younger participants to have their hearts moved and faith shaped by finding common cause in Christ’s name, even across differences.

While BVS is called creatively to reimagine some of its approaches amid a decline in volunteer numbers, it remains emblematic of the service orientation of the church. BVS includes a wide range of placement possibilities, some of which connect strongly with our GOD’S RACIAL JUSTICE BV. There is room in all of these service ministries for increased attention to this BV in programming. Similarly, each of these ministries should continue creatively to consider their place in the framework of formation which helps disciples more fully articulate their faith, in furtherance of our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV.

## Material Resources

Material Resources is a self-funding ministry which processes and ships kits and care items on behalf of outside partners, with operating income primarily derived from partner rental and service fees. Additional study is needed to better assess how well this ministry serves the Plan and its BV’s. Material Resources is the subject of one of the questions in the Additional Considerations portion of this report on page 9 and one part of the Additional Recommendation made on page 10, to assign this further study and assessment to a new Stewardship of Properties task team to be appointed by the Board.

## Office of Peacebuilding and Policy

The Office of Peacebuilding and Policy (“OPP”) carries pronouncements and positions identified in Annual Conference actions into the arena of public policy, including the outsized voice and persuasive authority the Church of the Brethren often has when it comes to matters of peace. This connects with the emphasis on the holistic peace of Christ which rounds out our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV. Additionally, OPP’s myriad of relationships and involvements help translate the concerns of the Brethren into more system-wide action on behalf of others near and far, connecting to the LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS BV.

Without downgrading OPP’s flexibility to operate within the broader boundaries of Annual Conference statements, however, its work will align with the Plan more directly and advance the Plan more robustly when matters related to our GOD’S RACIAL JUSTICE BV and the holistic peace emphasis of our CALL TO

DISCIPLESHIP BV are included more prominently in the patterns and rotations of OPP's partnerships and work. Other involvements may need to be rearranged in ways that open greater space for this.

### Mission Advancement

In working to inform the church of our denominational ministries and interpret our mission, the Mission Advancement office ("MA") will engage and communicate all of the Plan's emphases and strategies. In a way, the highly relational field work of MA will model how we enthusiastically join Jesus in the neighborhood and may be utilized to help connect congregations with stories and ideas of how others are doing so.

Our NEW TESTAMENT GIVING BV embraces a culture of giving. The church of Acts did not stop at giving a set percentage of financial resources to aid one another but responded to need with self-sacrifice and community-mindedness. MA will carry and share the stories of the New Testament and the Church of the Brethren in ways that help people be moved from the heart to participate. This will include stories learned from Global Mission of a culture oriented to what's given above what's gotten. And this will encourage congregations in their own contexts. Realigning responsibility for stewardship emphasis from the current DM to MA will help build mutuality between MA and church members and congregations. MA will be assertive in resourcing the church for stewardship emphasis, including spreading word of practical and technological ways that can be made available to give.

### Communications

Each component of the Communications department has value in supporting ministries under the Plan. A denominational magazine, website, news service, and responsible social media engagement combine to spread the word. Jesus in the Neighborhood stories must be regularly and abundantly sought and shared across the full spectrum of Brethren. Staff need to be in the field capturing positive stories all around. In a church where there frequently is a perceived disconnect between denominational leadership and people in the pews, there is much work to do.

Many church members who are especially engaged still prefer and rely upon print editions. The Brethren seem to have an unusually large segment of persons who do not use the internet yet. Therefore, while being attentive to trends and open to the possibility of more and more digital resourcing, providing print editions and paper copies of Messenger and Source should continue in this season.

The website is the entry portal for many into a view of the church. It is an important vehicle for moving us beyond excessive insider-ism and into the neighborhood. The website will need to advance the Plan and its BV's. To honor the Plan's emphases on engaging our neighbors and equipping the church, the website must interest non-Brethren inquirers up front, while also being easily navigable by Brethren searching for such things as event information, updates, and documents.

Our communications resources generally are high-quality and reflect a gifted staff. At the same time, there is room for greater sensitivity to the breadth of the church. MMB is revisiting the nearly four-decades-old communications policy adopted by our predecessor General Board. It is expected that a revised policy will emphasize care for the whole fabric of the church and will amplify the ultimate responsibility and editorial authority of the General Secretary.

## Brethren Press

[Recommendation from Brethren Press Reimagining Team to be handled separately. We do expect the publishing ministry to collaborate with other departments to provide resources to the church that advance all the Background Vision Strategies.]

## Organizational Resources

Organizational Resources (“OR”) supports the entire organization via the work of Finance, Information Technology (“IT”), the Brethren Historical Library and Archives (“BHLA”), and Building and Grounds (“BG”). These are essential in helping staff in other departments carry out the church’s mission. There are some areas that do warrant particular attention when it comes to the Plan and its BV’s.

The pandemic has pushed the church into new territory, including technologically. Denominational staff and congregations and districts will continue to need to do things in different ways. Strong consideration should be given to how IT staffing can both support staff in navigating new ways and consult with and resource the wider church where new avenues need to be explored and platforms built. This is part of a “flexible framework” for forming disciples, in keeping with our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV. It also is potentially a resource for equipping congregations to engage their neighbors, in keeping with our LOVE NEIGHBORS BV.

Our CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP BV calls for formation of disciples who more fully articulate their faith and embody the radical transformation of Jesus Christ and the holistic peace of Jesus Christ. And our GOD’S RACIAL JUSTICE BV, among other things, calls for our identification, confession and repentance of the whiteness and racialized hierarchy that have been integrated into Brethren identity as a prelude to dismantling barriers to our becoming more like the community of Revelation 7:9. The BHLA will be a powerful resource for looking back, in order to move forward. How have Brethren engaged in faith sharing before? What lessons have been learned? Where have we fallen short of racial justice before, and how does that help us see our falling short presently? What have the Brethren done since the 2007 Separate No More action of Annual Conference? What has repentance looked like in Brethren life and Practice and how might that apply or not apply here?

#### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The pandemic also has caused a shift in office use philosophies. There may well be fewer interested renters and tenants of space at the General Offices in the year(s) to come. While stewardship of properties is in some ways separate from this report and its recommendations on ministry priorities, there are some relevant questions, especially as Brethren Benefit Trust makes plans to reduce their rental footprint by as much as 75% beginning in 2022, and as the need has arisen for further assessment of Material Resources, noted earlier in this report. In what ways are our properties a good match or bad match for emerging realities? To what degree is being a property manager/leasing space a ministry under the Plan? If it is a significant ministry under the Plan, which BV's provide the best criteria for determining what to house here? How does our ownership and use of these facilities line up with the culture and giving practices we are called to live toward by our NEW TESTAMENT GIVING BV? What is the place of Material Resources and the warehouse in New Windsor, Maryland in the overall picture? EC recommends that MMB appoint a Stewardship of Properties task team to consider these and other related questions, to evaluate the moving pieces emerging from the pandemic, and to bring recommendations to the board.

#### Annual Conference

MMB has oversight of the finances of the Annual Conference office, which is a self-funding ministry operating from registration income and offerings. However, the Program and Arrangements Committee of the Annual Conference makes decisions about program and direction. EC discussed some potential changes to Annual Conference and entrusted those thoughts to the Moderator and General Secretary, both of whom are on the Leadership Team, which serves as the executive committee for Annual Conference.

## **RECOMMENDED DECLARATION OF PRIORITIES**

Based on this assessment, EC recommends to MMB the following declaration of priorities to bring ministries into alignment with the Plan:

- \*Develop a prominent, comprehensive, sustained framework for equipping evangelism.
- \*Develop a program about healing and reconciling relationships within the church and transforming conflict, including the intentional construction of a network of members who understand the dynamics of conflict and who are called to serve in a ministry bringing healing to our brokenness.
- \*Develop, in consultation with the Council of District Executives, a pilot program to help provide additional resources needed for effective ministry placement.
- \*Develop IT staff both to help other staff navigate the changing landscape of technology and to consult with and resource the wider church.
- \*Realign stewardship emphasis to go with the next version of Mission Advancement.
- \*Realign care of pastors programs to go with the next version of the Office of Ministry.

Once priorities are established, MMB will develop criteria to measure/assess how we are doing to advance each Background Vision Strategy.

## **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATION**

\*MMB will appoint a new Stewardship of Properties task team to consider questions raised in this report about property management and Material Resources and to bring recommendations to the board.

Submitted by the Executive Committee, serving as the Task Team for Foreground Vision Initiative #4: Thomas Dowdy, Carl Fike (Chair-elect), Lois Grove, Paul Munday (ex-officio), Colin Scott, Patrick Starkey (Chair), and David Steele (ex-officio), with appreciation to Nancy Miner, our Recorder.