



Church of the Brethren General Board

Infant Formula Concerns

February 24, 1979

WHEREAS breast milk, a natural food resource of considerable economic value to nations, is the ideal food for infants, containing the correct balance of nutrients and providing antibodies capable of fighting off infections present in the environment; and

WHEREAS responsible medical research has shown that the substitution of commercial infant formula for breast milk wherever poverty, illiteracy, impure water and inadequate sanitation prevail has resulted in infant malnutrition, illness, brain damage and death; and

WHEREAS the promotion practices of infant formula and milk companies encourage women to abandon the natural resources of breast feeding in favor of expensive commercial preparations and feeding bottles; and

WHEREAS the General Assembly of the United Nations has declared 1979 as the International Year of the Child, calling the world community to a heightened awareness of the welfare and rights of children, including the right to adequate nutrition; and

WHEREAS statements of Annual Conference in 1964, 1974 and 1975 cite the commitment of the Church of the Brethren not only to feeding the hungry, but to working for justice on world hunger concerns; and

WHEREAS Annual Conference in its study of Justice and Nonviolence in 1977 appealed to Brethren to “become aware of rampant injustice and subtle hidden violence in today’s world, examine our own involvement, and identify with the oppressed and suffering;” and

WHEREAS the Church of the Brethren General Board and Pension Board are engaged with other church agencies through the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility in efforts to redress practices of multinational corporations linked to the illness and death of babies through the promotion of bottle feeding; and

WHEREAS Brethren have a tradition of being selective in their buying, allowing faith and ethics to guide their economic practices; and

WHEREAS Nestlé, a transnational corporation based in Switzerland, controls over one-third of the world’s infant formula market but is immune from shareholder action by concerned groups in this country because its stock is not traded on the US market; and

WHEREAS direct appeals to Nestlé to change its sales promotion of infant formula in developing nations up to this point have been futile;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT THE GENERAL BOARD OF THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN HEREBY:

- I. Calls on Nestlé to
 - a. cease advertising its infant formula in areas where social, economic and environmental conditions are such that the use of formula is apt to damage the health and well-being of infants;
 - b. remove “milk nurses” from hospitals and maternity clinics;
 - c. discontinue free sample distribution to consumers; and
 - d. terminate the giving of special incentives to doctors and other health professionals; and
2. Endorses the inter national boycott against Nestlé and its products and its subsidiaries and their products and services until such time that Nestlé’s marketing policies and practices are corrected; and
3. Instructs the General Offices and related agencies of the General Board to observe the boycott in their own buying practices; and
4. Calls upon congregations to study the underlying matters of malnutrition, disease, and death of infants in developing areas, and to act in ways consistent with the mission of the church; and
5. Calls on members of the Church of the Brethren to cease purchasing Nestlé products, to inform the Nestlé Company of their action and the reasons for it, and to share their concerns with food industry personnel, neighbors and friends, until such time as Nestlé makes the changes called for in Item I; and
6. Calls on the United States development assistance programs at home and abroad to encourage breast feeding and to refuse to support the promotion of infant formula in areas where social and economic conditions may prohibit its safe use by the general population; and
7. Requests the Executive Committee to monitor the results of this action and, in reference to the Nestlé boycott, to recommend continuance or termination by the October 1979 General Board meeting.

Adopted February 24, 1979

Executive Committee Minutes, October 19-20, 1979

Nestlé Boycott: In February 1979, the General Board adopted a resolution, “The Church of the Brethren and Infant Formula Concerns,” which, among other things, called upon Nestlé to cease certain advertising and promotion practices in areas where social, economic and environmental conditions are such that the use of formula is apt to damage the health and well-being of Infants; endorsed the international boycott against Nestlé; called upon congregations to study the underlying matters of malnutrition, disease and death of infants in developing areas; and called upon the Church of the Brethren to cease purchasing Nestlé products and to inform the Nestlé Company of their action and the reasons for it.

The final recommendation of that resolution requested “the Executive Committee to monitor the results of this action and, in reference to the Nestlé boycott, to recommend continuance or termination by the October 1979 General Board meeting.”

Howard Royer, in whose portfolio this matter has been lodged since February, shared a number of exhibits as well as a film entitled, "Into the Mouths of Babes," by Bill Moyers, filmed in the Dominican Republic. He reported that Louise Bowman represented the General Board at a significant meeting held in New York on September 11, 1979. The meeting was an effort to bring together the groups who have endorsed the Nestlé boycott. The Church of the Brethren also was a party to a letter to the Nestlé Manager in Switzerland under date of October 1st, which outlined steps to discontinue the use of "milk nurses" and free samples, as well as direct consumer promotion in those developing areas. In early October there was a meeting in Geneva with the World Health Organization on this issue.

That meeting was closed to the press but the unconfirmed word is that the industry conceded all of the requested points. Even with those concessions, a lot of hard work is still ahead in monitoring compliance and the necessary actions to effect the desired changes.

It was noted during discussion that this concern is just beginning to take root on the local congregational level. Further comments indicated that consciousness needs to be raised not only in connection with the use of infant formula in developing areas but the question, "What are we saying to our own mothers about breast feeding?" needs to be addressed. The ICCR has done some research in connection with infant formula use in this country but difficulties are being experienced in getting this information processed.

Discussion also centered on the selection of issues to be addressed by the General Board. While we have not been able to cover the "waterfront" the Board has attempted to invest effort in examples of corporate immorality such as the Chelsea campaign in Virginia, and violence on TV and in the media. The issue of infant formula was selected because the General Board owned stock in American Homes, another producer of infant formula. American Homes was confronted by the General Board and others through stockholder resolutions.

VOIED by the Executive Committee, acting as a committee of the whole, that the infant formula concerns, including the Nestlé boycott, continue to be addressed by the General Board, with a review of the program in the Fall of 1980.