

2017 Annual Conference Delegate Report

Bunkertown Church of the Brethren

Delegate: Ronald Gordon

The 231st Annual Conference (June 28 - July 2, 2017) of the Church of the Brethren was held in DeVos Place, located at 303 Monroe Avenue, NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49503. The conference center features a 162,000 Square Foot column free space for conventions or exhibits, comprised of a 40,000-square foot ballroom, 26 sub-dividable meeting rooms (32,000 square feet), and a 2,404-seat performing arts theater. DeVos Place is also home to the Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra and the Grand Rapids Ballet Company.

DELEGATE BODY:

- Six hundred and seventy-two delegates assembled to discuss, pray, and vote on Standing Committee Recommendations for processing a full Business Agenda. Early morning business sessions began with a thoughtful Bible Study expounded by Bob Bowman. The Leadership Team offered much appreciated interpretation and guidance for the Delegate Body during moments of uncertainty.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

- **UB 1 VISION OF ECUMENISM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**
A new item of business at AC2012 called for the discontinuation of the Committee on Interchurch Relations, and requested of the Leadership Team to appoint a new committee to draft a “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” that would determine a future path for the Church of the Brethren toward being a part of the larger ecumenical church. An interim report was heard in AC2013. The AC2014 report stated: *“The study committee examined the assignment with two objectives: to look at the history of the Church of the Brethren and celebrate the strides made possible in relationship with others of shared values and concern; and to examine the various ways members, congregations, and the denomination might engage with the larger community of communions in cooperative efforts toward ‘God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done.’ ”*

Delegates at AC2016 received a report from the Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century study committee that a final draft would be completed for AC2017. However, discussion on the extensive work of the Review and Evaluation Committee lasted until the end of the Saturday afternoon business session. Moderator Sheppard called for a vote to refer this report until AC2018, which was then passed by the Delegate Body.

- **UB 2 REVIEW AND EVALUATION**
This committee is elected in the fifth year of each decade and reports their recommendations to the Delegate Body in the seventh year. Former Annual Conference moderator Tim Harvey carefully articulated the committee's ten recommendations for improving the organizational structure of the denomination. After many requests for clarification, discussion, and prayerful considerations, Delegates were asked to vote on the first five recommendations as one block, and numbers six through ten on an individual basis.
1. Recommends to the Mission and Ministry Board that the duties of the Leadership Team as described in Section III.C.2. of the Manual of Organization and Polity be amended as follows:
 - g. *Coordinate a gathering of denominational leadership every three to five years. The leadership gathering would potentially include representatives from denominational and agency staff and board members, Annual Conference-elected leadership, and district leadership. The purpose of the leadership gathering is to focus on matters of shared vision and ministry collaboration in the Church of the Brethren.*

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2. Recommends to the Mission and Ministry Board that Article V., Section 1 of the Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren be amended to include further responsibility for ensuring the implementation of denominational vision, as follows:
 - *Coordinate denominational envisioning; assume responsibility for how denominational vision shall be implemented, giving consideration to emphasizing a unified vision among denomination, districts, and congregations.*
3. Recommends to the Mission and Ministry Board that the functions of the Leadership Team as described in Article V., Section 1 of the Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren be amended as follows:
 - *general oversight for Annual Conference and its budget, in consultation with the Annual Conference program and arrangements committee, the Conference director, and the Corporation treasurer;*
 - *employ the Conference director and provide for his or her periodic evaluation.*
4. Recommends to the Mission and Ministry Board that the membership of the Leadership Team as described in Article V., Section 2 of the Bylaws of the Church of the Brethren be amended with the addition of a district executive. The district executive would be recommended by the Council of District Executives and affirmed by Annual Conference, serving a three-year term.

Section 2. Membership

The leadership team consists of the current moderator, moderator-elect, Conference secretary, a district executive, and the general secretary. The district executive will be appointed by the Council of District Executives, approved by Annual Conference, and will serve a three-year term.

5. Recommends to the Mission and Ministry Board that a study committee be appointed by the Mission and Ministry Board to assess prudent stewardship related to the General Offices in Elgin, IL.

Recommendations #1 to #5 were accepted by the Delegate Body as one vote that all five be referred to the Mission and Ministry Board since they were by-law changes.

6. Recommends to the 2017 Annual Conference that On Earth Peace no longer remain an agency of the Church of the Brethren.

Voting from 650 of the 672 registered Delegate Body resulted in 370 voting Yes (56.9%) and 280 voting No (43.1%) which failed to meet the required two-thirds majority. Although this recommendation failed the required percentage necessary, it validated Tim Harvey's repeated assertion that On Earth Peace "ministers to some, but not all of the denomination." The substantial 57% Yes votes reflects a growing dissatisfaction with the unpopular positions taken by On Earth Peace in recent years. In other words, although OEP has retained their official status, the denomination has given them an approval rating of only 43 percent. See also this implication to Recommendation #8.

7. Recommends to the 2017 Annual Conference that all congregations, districts, denominational, and agency staff find ways to involve the work of On Earth Peace in the ongoing mission and ministry of the Church of the Brethren. This recommendation failed by a simple majority vote.
8. Recommends to the 2017 Annual Conference that Query: Viability of On Earth Peace as an Agency of the Church of the Brethren be returned to the Southeastern District. Conference Secretary, Jim Beckwith ruled that Recommendation #8 was answered when Recommendation #6 failed.

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9. Recommends to the 2017 Annual Conference that all congregations examine their financial contributions to both district and denominational ministries, and bring their giving into compliance with the Congregational Ethics Polity as outlined in Chapter 4 of the *Manual of Organization and Polity*. Congregations that feel they cannot do so should be in conversation about this with their district, in accordance with the 2004 Annual Conference Statement, *Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions*.

This recommendation was adopted by the Delegate Body with a simple majority vote.

10. Recommends to the 2017 Annual Conference that Standing Committee rescind the 2014 rejection of On Earth Peace's Statement of Inclusion (2014 Annual Conference Minutes, p. 117).
 - On Earth Peace Statement of Inclusion: "*We are troubled by attitudes and actions in the church which exclude persons on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or any other aspect of human identity. We believe God calls the church to welcome all persons into full participation in the life of the faith community*" (2012 Annual Conference Minutes, p. 68).
 - 2014 Standing Committee response: "*Standing Committee does not support the 2011 statement of inclusion of OEP as an agency of the church, but we will continue to commit ourselves to walk in love together in the face of differing interpretations of scripture and AC statements and decisions*" (2014 Annual Conference Minutes, p. 117).

A response from the current Standing Committee essentially nullified this recommendation: "*Standing Committee humbly receives the chastisement of the Review and Evaluation Committee in Recommendation #10 of their report. We apologize for the misunderstanding and hurt caused by our 2014 response to On Earth Peace's Statement of Inclusion.*"

- UB 3 VITALITY AND VIABILITY

The Future District Structure query presented to AC2015 was returned to the Mid-Atlantic District as recommended by the 2015 Standing Committee. Many hours of discussion centered around this item of business because of a perceived conflict with the mandate of the Review and Evaluation Committee which is also an item of that year's business. Some microphone speeches raised concerns that a study committee on future structure might result in a duplication of efforts by the Review and Evaluation Committee, while others, conversely, expressed opinions that a study committee on the vitality of the denomination would look far beyond the narrow structural issues pursued under the Review and Evaluation Committee. Delegates finally decided that a study committee be formed to examine the broader concern of vitality across the denomination, congregations, districts, and the wellness of their interactions. A report is expected at AC2017.

During this interim two years, chairperson John Jantzi explained that a significant turnover of committee members has resulted in the current membership only being finalized in the summer of 2016. Therefore, the committee requests an additional year to complete a final report.

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- UB 4 THE AUTHORITY OF ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND DISTRICTS REGARDING THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF MINISTERS, CONGREGATIONS, AND DISTRICTS

A new item of business at AC2016 by the West-Marva District petitioned Annual Conference to consider: *“How shall districts respond when credentialed ministers and/or congregations conduct or participate in same sex weddings.”* Executive Director David Steele presented the committees multi-segmented report with a final recommendation given from the floor (which does not appear in the report itself): *“That this statement of clarification about our current polity and standard practice be received as the answer to our assignment and that the church turn its attention to the framing of a compelling vision for how we will continue the work of Jesus together.”*

Additional information was granted in Authority and Accountability Questions Answers.

Changes to the original report:

- In the sentence originally reading: *“We will not take lightly decisions that will terminate an individual’s ministerial credentials or expel a congregation from the body.”* The word “disorganize” will replace the former word “expel.”
 - Also delete “from the body” at the end of the sentence.
 - Added was “Some districts have begun to speak out about expelling member congregations but current polity and standard practice provide only for the disorganizing of congregations.”
 - Added to the next paragraph to read: *“The officiating of same sex weddings by credentialed clergy shall be handled in the same way as any other report of ministerial conduct: if a district executive minister receives a report based on direct knowledge that a minister has performed a same gender marriage, the information shall be reported to the district’s credentialing body as a matter of ministerial conduct. This is a standard practice established by the Council of District Executives”*
- UB 5 CREATION CARE
This committee met several times online, conducted a survey to better understand the tempo of Brethren regarding this issue, and then met with Brethren Benefit Trust and other department officers at the denominational headquarters in Elgin, to present their survey data. After much consideration, the committee requested another year to present a completed report at AC2018 with these interim thoughts: *“We are optimistic. There are many ways for individuals, congregations and the denomination to meaningfully act on the conviction of caring for God’s earth and people. We plan to provide informational resources, grounded in Brethren values, that will increase the collective efficiency of our energy use and increase our use of renewable energy. We believe this can be done while strengthening our communities and spiritual life.”*

NEW BUSINESS:

- NB 1 POLITY FOR AGENCIES

Two queries of business submitted to AC2016 (NB1 & NB2) questioned the viability of On Earth Peace and whether it should retain official status as an Annual Conference agency. The 2016 Delegate Body referred these items to the current Review and Evaluation Committee to bring recommendations concerning these items of business. In consideration of this situation, On Earth Peace submitted their own query of business in Polity For Agencies to point out a possible lack of a standard polity process to remove an official agency, plus a suitable framework to resolve such conflicts. The 2017 Delegate Body

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voted to accept the recommendation of Standing Committee that this query be respectfully returned to On Earth Peace, and that the Annual Conference Leadership Team update current polity to rectify any misunderstandings.

- **NB 2 PATIENT HOPE IN MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE**

On Earth Peace presented this query in an attempt to bring greater consistency within the denomination regarding forbearance when Brethren disagree over matters of conscience. *“...there is a largely unnoticed inconsistency in the practice of living with disagreements in matters of conscience. Large numbers of congregations are routinely granted forbearance on a wide variety of matters in which their conscience will not permit participation in a particular aspect of denominational program or adherence to certain beliefs.”*

The Delegate Body accepted the two-part recommendation of Standing Committee that 1) *“...there be no delay in processing related items of business”*, (Review and Evaluation Committee recommendations), and 2) *“Insights of NB 2 be referred to the entire church for serious and prayerful consideration.”* Standing Committee also requested that the Mission and Ministry Board in consultation with On Earth Peace and others provide resources, and further incorporate this work as a continuation of the “Living Together as Christ Calls” query (AC 2016, NB 4).

- **NB 3 BROTHERS VALUES INVESTING**

Brethren Benefit Trust has for many decades administered their pension plan and asset management services to refuse investing in firms that do not adhere to Church of the Brethren Annual Conference statements which they have termed Socially Responsible Investing (SRI). However, SRI is a generic acronym that means different things to different people. Therefore, BBT requested a change in terminology. *“Because of the ambiguity of what Socially Responsible Investing means, the Brethren Benefit Trust Board has taken action to adopt a term that articulates what SRI means within the context of the Church of the Brethren. In November 2016, the board named that term – Brethren Values Investing (BVI). BVI is distinct in that it articulates what the social screens are, and are not. They derive from Church of the Brethren Annual Conference statements; they are not the lone opinions of a single agency or individual within the denomination. As a result of Brethren Benefit Trust adopting the term Brethren Values Investing to replace Socially Responsible Investing, it is the Brethren Benefit Trust Board’s desire that references to Socially Responsible Investing that are in the organization’s Articles of Organization be replaced with Brethren Values Investing.”*

Due to the Saturday afternoon business session approaching 4:30 p.m., the Conference Officers declared that this Query will need to be delayed until the 2018 Annual Conference.

- **NB 4 POLITY FOR ELECTING BROTHERS BENEFIT TRUST BOARD DIRECTORS**

Brethren Benefit Trust laments the inability to garner qualified names to be selected for Annual Conference ballots. *“Brethren Benefit Trust has answered the request of Annual Conference to locate, vet, and nominate four people each year. However, this means that at least three of the four people Brethren Benefit Trust each year identifies to be a potential board member are either not chosen for the final Annual Conference ballot or lose in the final election. Brethren Benefit Trust finds this reality to be problematic. In a denomination the size of the Church of the Brethren, it is increasingly difficult for Brethren Benefit Trust to identify people who are willing and who have the skills to serve on the organization’s board. People who have willingly applied to be candidates for several election cycles no longer want to put their names forward given the likely outcome of not being elected once again. While*

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Brethren Benefit Trust supports the Annual Conference election process and wants to help find qualified candidates, it believes a new process should be adopted. The new process would require no more than two nominees for the election of a director on the Brethren Benefit Trust Board.”

Church of the Brethren Benefit Trust Articles of Organization

“Election:

A. Four directors are to be elected by Annual Conference from a ballot submitted by Standing Committee. The officers of Annual Conference shall be responsible for this election. A minimum of two nominees are to be identified by Standing Committee’s Nominating Committee for the Brethren Benefit Trust Board position elected by Annual Conference delegates. If only two are identified, those two will be the nominees on the Annual Conference ballot. If there are more than two nominees for the Brethren Benefit Trust Board position, the Nominating Committee will present a ballot of no more than four nominees to Standing Committee, which shall vote and reduce the initial ballot to its tentative final form.”

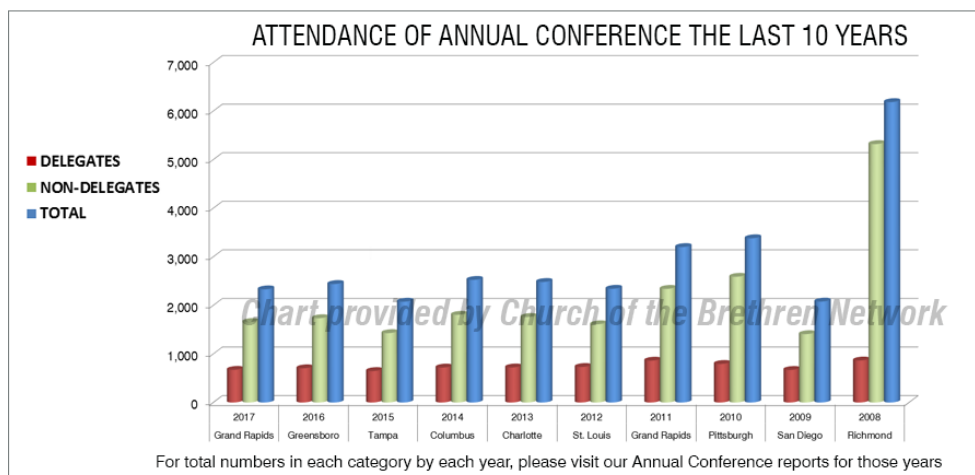
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OTHER BUSINESS:

- Report of Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee was accepted that recommended a cost of living adjustment of 1.0%.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

- Total registered attendance was 2,329, comprised of 672 Delegates, and 1,657 Non-Delegates. *See Attendance Chart below.*
- Total offerings received were tentatively announced as \$55,283.55.
- Church of the Brethren Association for the Arts raised \$11,250.00 for world hunger outreach through their Quilt Auction
- Blood Drive collected 190 units with the help of many dedicated volunteers.
- Cincinnati, Ohio will be the host city of AC2018 in the Duke Energy Center.
- Future Locations were announced by the Program & Arrangements Committee.



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WORSHIP:

- Leading In Worship: Bev Anspaugh, Music Coordinator; Scott Bacon, Adult Choir Director; Marianne Houff, Children's Choir Director, Debbie Noffsinger, Worship Center; Jonathan Emmons, Organist; Jenny Williams, Pianist; Jon Wilson, Guitar; Andy Duffey, Drums. At the beginning of the evening services, a Worship Bell announced that it was time for worship. Innovative for this year were Risk Hope Moments which challenged and encouraged worshippers to reexamine their lives along the Conference theme of *Risk Hope*.

SERMONS:

- Wednesday Evening, JUNE 28 : Moderator Carol Scheppard - RISK HOPE! OUR GOD REIGNS IN THE DARKNESS
Professor at Bridgewater College and member of the Lebanon Church of the Brethren, Mount Sidney, Virginia.
- Thursday Evening, JUNE 29 : Jose Calleja Otero - STRANGE WORLD
District Executive of the Puerto Rico District - Church of the Brethren. He has also served in various roles in the Vega Baja congregation.
- Friday Evening, JUNE 30 : Michaela Alphonse - CAN I GET A WITNESS
Involved in pastoral ministry at Miami First Church of the Brethren, Miami, Florida. She also serves with Mission Evangelique des Eglises des Frères D'Haiti and Global Mission and Service.
- Saturday Evening, JULY 1 : Donna Ritchey Martin - HELD TOGETHER FOR GOOD
Co-pastor at Grossnickle Church of the Brethren, Mid-Atlantic District. She also served congregations in the Illinois-Wisconsin District.
- Sunday Morning, JULY 2 : Matthew Fike - BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING
Pastor at Lebanon Church of the Brethren, Shenandoah District. He has also served congregations in the Southern Ohio, Virginia, West Marva, and Districts.

Thank you to all members of the Bunkertown Church of the Brethren for your confidence and trust in me to serve as your delegate to our denominations 231st recorded Annual Conference.

Ronald Gordon