

2018 Annual Conference Delegate Report

Location: Cincinnati, Ohio
Delegate: Ronald Gordon
Church: Bunkertown Church of the Brethren

The 232th Annual Conference (July 4 - July 8) of the Church of the Brethren was held in Duke Energy Convention Center, located at 525 Elm Street Cincinnati, Ohio 45202. A spacious Elm Street Entrance leads to a 48,500 square-foot lobby complimented by a Mural Wall. The conference center features three levels to suit the most complex requirements of an event planner. First Floor accommodations include Exhibit Hall A (92,350 sq ft), Exhibit Hall B (60,190 sq ft), and Exhibit Hall C (42,780 sq ft), with a combined space of 195,320 sq ft and 19 foot ceilings. Second Floor offerings include 30 meeting rooms plus skywalks to adjacent hotels. Third Floor ballrooms will accommodate the superior meal events, providing an enterprise kitchen with multiple service corridors, pre-function lobbies, and even a press room. Ballrooms C & D were host to the Brethren Revival Fellowship dinner, the largest meal event of Annual Conference. Serving as the anchor hotel this year was the Millennium which is the largest hotel in the downtown area. Most of its 872 guest rooms offer impressive views of the city and especially from the rooftop pool and sun deck. It also provides flexible event space for conferences, meetings, weddings, in addition to a fitness center, business center, bistro restaurant, on-site car rental, valet parking, complimentary Wi-Fi connections, and express checkout by phone.

OFFICERS & LEADERSHIP:

- 2018 Conference Officers were Moderator Samuel Sarpiya, Pastor of Rockford Community Church of the Brethren in Rockford, Illinois; Moderator-elect Donita Keister, Associate Pastor for Children and Pastoral Care, Buffalo Valley Church of the Brethren, Mifflinburg, Pennsylvania; and Secretary James Beckwith, Pastor of Annville Church of the Brethren in Annville, Pennsylvania.
- At the conclusion of the Saturday business session, Moderator Samuel Sarpiya Passed the Gavel to Moderator-elect Donita Keister .
- Newly installed Moderator Donita Keister announced that “Proclaim Christ, Reclaim Passion” will be the theme for next year's Conference in Greensboro, North Carolina. Scripture for the Conference will be 2 Corinthians 5:17-18; *“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.”*

DELEGATE BODY:

- Six hundred and seventy-three delegates assembled to discuss, pray, and vote on Standing Committee Recommendations for processing a full Business Agenda during Table Talk. Delegates respectfully waited to be a microphone speakers before voting on the current Item of Business.

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.’ ”*

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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 Carol Sheppard called for a vote to defer this report until AC2018, which was then passed by the delegate body.

Standing Committee recommended that the study committee present its report from AC2017 and move that the “Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century” paper be accepted by the 2018 delegate body. With one amendment the report was accepted.

- **UB 2 VITALITY AND VIABILITY**

The AC2015 Conference returned a query on District Structure to the Mid-Atlantic District because of a perceived conflict with the mandate of the Review and Evaluation Committee which was also an item of that year's business. Some microphone speakers 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.

Chairperson John Jantzi explained to the AC2017 delegates that during the past two years, a significant turnover of committee members has resulted in the current membership only being finalized in the summer of 2016. Therefore, the Vitality and Viability Study Committee requests an additional year to complete a final report.

The report was adopted per the request of Standing Committee *“that this report be adopted as the completion of the study committee's assignment and its resources be referred to the Compelling Vision Working Group for its possible use in the Compelling Vision process.”*

- **UB 3 CREATION CARE**

The AC2016 New Business 3 “Christian Responsibility to Care for God’s Creation” was accepted per the recommendation of the 2016 Standing Committee that: “a Creation Care study committee be appointed to work with Brethren Benefit Trust to develop ways to support and extend our knowledge of renewable energy production with our financial investments and involvement in community projects to reduce our contributions to greenhouse gas concentrations and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.” A three-member committee was selected by Standing Committee. This query came from the Polo Church of the Brethren in the Illinois/Wisconsin district which expressed dissatisfaction with the action of AC2014 that returned the query “Guidance for Responding to the Changing of Earth’s Climate” to the sponsoring district and congregation. Standing Committee presented the reason for acceptance of this query due to an emphasis on financial investments to be the major difference from the previous query which had been returned. Some microphone speakers expressed concern that the denomination should make better utilization of its finances in the area of evangelism. The delegate body adopted the report as recommended by Standing Committee.

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- UB 4 COMPELLING VISION

The root of this business item originally stems from AC2016 New Business 1: “Same Sex Weddings.” A query submitted by the West-Marva District petitioning Annual Conference to consider: “How shall districts respond when credentialed ministers and/or congregations conduct or participate in Same Sex Weddings.” A motion from the 2016 delegate body referred this item to the Leadership Team, to also be in consultation with the Council of District Executives. The Leadership Team is composed of the Annual Conference officers: Moderator, Moderator-elect, the Conference Secretary, and the General Secretary of the Church of the Brethren. Before the delegates could address the Standing Committee recommendation of this query, they first needed to satisfy the decision of AC2011 stipulating that human sexuality matters should be discussed “outside the query process,” and this would have required a two-thirds majority to overturn the former decision.

Following hours of discussion and numerous speeches emanating from long lines before microphones, the vote failed to reach a two-thirds majority which immediately places the original query to the delegates as a new item of business. An amendment to remove selected wording (*“The districts shall respond with discipline, not with allowances based on personal conscience.”*) from the query also failed. Near the end of the business session a motion to return the query was left hanging until the next day, at which time the sponsor retracted his own motion in order to defer to another motion that would refer the query to the Leadership Team. A simple majority vote succeeded and the Leadership Team was asked, “to bring clarity and guidance concerning the authority of Annual Conference and districts regarding the accountability of ministers, congregations, and districts, bringing recommendations to the 2017 Annual Conference.”

The Leadership Team brought this matter to AC2017 under Unfinished Business 4: *“The Authority of Annual Conference and Districts Regarding the Accountability of Ministers, Congregations, and Districts.”* Executive Director David Steele presented the committee's 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.”

Following AC2017 the Leadership Team commissioned a “Compelling Vision Working Group” to begin a process that would focus on creating a unique vision for the Church of the Brethren. *“It is our hope that this process will result in a distinctive new beginning for our life together as the Church of the Brethren. The process is intended to move us beyond our conversations, debates, and official statements into the experience of vision and purpose as we proclaim and serve Christ together.”* Delegates received the Leadership Team's report and adopted their recommendation that all new business for the 2019 Annual Conference be set aside so that more time would be available to the Compelling Vision process. This action required a two-thirds majority vote.

- UB 5 UPDATE TO POLITY REGARDING ANNUAL CONFERENCE AGENCIES

An interim report was received from the Leadership Team and granted an additional year to complete their work.

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- **UB 6 AMENDMENTS TO THE BYLAWS OF THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

The 2018 delegate body adopted by a two-thirds majority vote the recommendation of the Review and Evaluation Committee that three amendments be made to the bylaws of the Church of the Brethren by the Mission and Ministry Board. (Amendments to the bylaws must originate with a congregational query or from the Mission and Ministry Board)

1. 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:

- Assume responsibility for how denominational vision shall be implemented, giving consideration to emphasizing a unified vision among denomination, districts, and congregations.

2. 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.

3. 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.

- **UB 7 DENOMINATIONAL LEADERSHIP GATHERING**

The 2018 delegate body voted down a recommendation of the 2017 Review and Evaluation Committee:

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:
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.

NEW BUSINESS:

- **NB 1 BRETHREN VALUES INVESTING** was adopted by the delegate body with a two-thirds majority vote per the recommendation of the 2018 Standing Committee that Church of the Brethren Benefit Trust's Articles of Organization change terminology from "socially responsible investing" to "Brethren Values investing."

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- NB 2 POLITY FOR ELECTING BRETHREN BENEFIT TRUST BOARD DIRECTORS was adopted by the delegate body with a two-thirds majority vote per the recommendation of the 2018 Standing Committee.
- NB 3 VISION FOR A GLOBAL CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN was adopted by the delegate body per the recommendation of the 2018 Standing Committee.
- NB 4 POLITY FOR ELECTING THE DISTRICT EXECUTIVE REPRESENTATIVE TO THE PASTORAL COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS ADVISORY COMMITTEE was adopted by the delegate body by a two-thirds majority vote per the recommendation of the 2018 Standing Committee.
- NB 5 CHANGE IN DELEGATE REPRESENTATION AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE - The Leadership Team requested the approval by the 2018 Standing Committee that this item be withdrawn from consideration by the delegate body because a change in polity would also require a change in the bylaws. This outcome can only originate through the query process or as a recommendation from the Mission and Ministry Board. This item of new business was deferred to the Mission and Ministry Board for review.

OTHER BUSINESS:

- Report of Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee was accepted that recommended a cost of living adjustment of 2.0%.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

- Total registered attendance was 2,233, comprised of 673 Delegates, and 1,560 Non-Delegates. See Attendance Chart below.
- Total offerings received were tentatively announced as \$60,223.80.
- Church of the Brethren Association for the Arts raised \$8,100.00 for world hunger outreach through their Quilt Auction
- Blood Drive collected 159 units with the help of many dedicated volunteers.
- Greensboro, North Carolina will be the host city of AC2019 in the Joseph S. Koury Convention Center/Sheraton Hotel, which claims to be the largest “hotel/convention center” complex between Atlanta and Washington, D.C. Representatives from Greensboro were in the Exhibit hall promoting next years venue with Brochures.
- Review all Future Locations announced by the Program & Arrangements Committee.

WORSHIP:

- Leading In Worship: Josh Tindall, Music Coordinator; Geneva Price, Adult Choir Director; Barb, Saylor, Children's Choir Director; Debbie Noffsinger, Worship Center; John Huber, Organist; Elizabeth Tindall, Pianist.

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SERMONS:

- Wednesday Evening, JULY 4 : Moderator Samuel Sarpiya - WE ARE A LIVING PARABLE
Pastor of Rockford Community Church of the Brethren in Rockford, Illinois.
- Thursday Evening, JULY 5 : Brian Messler - THE UPSIDE-DOWN
Pastor of Ephrata Church of thw Brethren in Ephrata, Pennsylvania.
- Friday Evening, JULY 6 : Rosanna Eller McFadden - Read All Over
Pastor of Creekside Church of the Brethren in Elkhart, Indiana.
- Saturday Evening, JULY 7 : Angela Finet - AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?
Pastor of Nokesville Church of the Brethren in Nokesville, Virginia.
- Sunday Morning, JULY 8 : Leonard Sweet - A CHARGE TO KEEP: KEEP CHARGED FOR 21ST
CENTURY MINISTRY AND MISSION
Professor of Evangelism at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

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 232st recorded Annual Conference.

Ronald Gordon