

2019 Annual Conference Delegate Report

Location: Greensboro, North Carolina
Delegate: Ronald Gordon
Church: Bunkertown Church of the Brethren

CONFERENCE CENTER

The 233th Annual Conference (July 3 - July 7, 2019) of the Church of the Brethren was held in the Joseph S. Koury Convention Center/Sheraton Hotel, located at 3121 Gate City Blvd, Greensboro, NC 27407, which claims to be the largest “hotel/convention center” between Atlanta and Washington, D.C. The Convention Center offers over 250,000 square feet of meeting and event space, 100,000 square feet of pre-function and exhibition space, three major ballrooms that accommodates functions with up to 6,000 guests, plus 71 breakout rooms, and 14 board rooms. The entire complex includes wireless Internet access.

SPECIAL NOTES

- Five New Congregations were recognized this year. Faith in Action COB, Northern Ohio District; Floyd Iglesia Cristiana Nueva Vida, Virlina District; Hanging Rock COB, West Marva District; Living Stream COB, Pacific Northwest District; and Veritas COB, Atlantic Northeast District.
- Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa Nigerian Guests president Joel S. Billi and EYN liaison officer Markus Gamache update delegates on the present situation in north-east Nigeria, and the need for more protection of radical insurgents who kidnapped 270+ girls in the village of Chibok in 2014.
- Steven Schweitzer, Academic Dean at Bethany Theological Seminary was one of several morning Bible Study speakers.
- Brethren Benefit Trust presented their annual slideshow of the Pension Plan Members who went to be with the Lord during the past year.
- Love Feast & Communion was celebrated by the delegate body and non-delegates who wished to participate. This was a new experience for most if not all Conference attendees since it was the first such service in recent memory. Moist towels were used instead of water basins, most probably because of convention center liability restrictions.

INSIGHT SESSIONS

- Numerous Insight Sessions housed in Mini Auditoriums and Conventional Classrooms were offered to better educate, enlighten, and equip individuals and congregations for more effective ministry. Topics ranged over a wide category of faith, witness, discipleship, worship, Brethren specific topics, heritage, clergy specifics, family life, youth specifics, inter-culture, health issues, and legal advice.

EXHIBITS

- Exhibits were located throughout various hallways and numerous Meeting Rooms. Every year these booths provide an opportunity for Brethren to learn about established agencies within the denomination and the programs or services they offer, or special interest groups promoting their cause, or Brethren related commercial ventures, or to enjoy a glimpse of heritage and history.

OFFICERS

- 2019 Conference Officers were Moderator Donita Keister, member of Buffalo Valley Church of the Brethren in Mifflinburg, PA; Moderator-elect Paul Munday, Writer, consultant, ordained minister; and Secretary Jim Beckwith, Pastor of Annville Church of the Brethren in Annville, Pennsylvania.

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UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- Business Items and Study Committee activity from previous years will be suspended for this year in preference for the Compelling Vision process.

NEW BUSINESS

❖ Compelling Vision History

The root of this business item originally stems from AC2016 New Business 1: *“Same Sex Weddings.”*, a query submitted 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.”* 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 of 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 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.”*

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*

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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.

❖ Compelling Vision Process

The Compelling Vision Process Team chaired by Rhonda Pittman Gingrich, also included Michaela Alphonse, Kevin Daggett, Brian Messler, Alan Stucky, Kay Weaver, 2018 moderator Samuel Sarpiya, 2019 moderator Donita Keister, 2020 moderator Paul Munday, and Conference director Chris Douglas. Visit the Compelling Vision Website to gain a complete disclosure of articles, reports, statements, or questions.

Extracts from their Frequently Asked Questions list are:

- *“The BOTTOM LINE IS JESUS, and our conviction that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit will reveal His perfect Will for the Church of the Brethren, for this time. We believe God gives each expression of His family, a unique calling for each season of ministry. We believe a new season is upon us as the Church of the Brethren; as this adventure unfolds, we believe God wants to send us forth with a fresh mission, rooted in His Word, marked by focus, energy, and faithfulness. That agenda is controlling our process.”*
- *“In addition to Annual Conference, conversations will take place at denominational gatherings (including Young Adult Conference and National Youth Conference), within districts, and in other settings such as agency boards and staff. Every voice will be heard as we collect comments from each conversation.”*
- *“This process is not designed to address with specificity ongoing matters of conflict. We anticipate that part of this journey toward a Compelling Vision will take us through conversations about the way forward from the place of conflict where we have long been stagnated. We believe to have a compelling vision together we will need to discover that way forward.”*
- *“The compelling vision process is not designed to impact the autonomy of districts and congregations. We are, however, striving for a vision that individuals, congregations, and districts will embrace and adopt as their own. The Church of the Brethren, Inc, the primary servant organization governed by Annual Conference, will use the compelling vision outcome as a guiding document for establishing mission priorities and parameters.”*

- ❖ Speakers at microphones were scant this year except for minor requests for clarity and procedure. This noticeable absence provided adequate time for serious discussion at each delegate table. Digital clocks on the display screens moderated allotted time for discussing all questions and processes. A total of 19 questions were introduced by the Process Team for discussion by the delegate body. Group participation

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between the Process Team and delegates produced a much different atmosphere than the regular query/debate/motion of business in other years. Delegates occasionally held each others hands while praying. Mood in the conference hall was noted as casual and flexible.

1. Delegates were seated around the usual discussion tables comprised of about seven or eight persons. One of which was a Table Facilitator whose task was to encourage conversation, guide discussion, seek opinions, moderate allotted time for each process, and invite another delegate to be a scribe that would record the activity.
2. iPad networked input was a first this year. The Process Team enlisted the data collection services of CoVision, headquartered in Oakland, California. Representatives of CoVision were present to assist the Process Team and trouble-shoot technological difficulties at each table.
3. Table Facilitators sent table discussion input to the Process Team who could view table input in real-time. Chair Rhonda Pittman Gingrich humorously remarked that responses from all the table iPads were flying past their own monitoring system so fast, that reading each response was like drinking from a firehose.
4. Over the three-day experience numerous Discussion Questions were announced by the Process Team and simultaneously displayed on screen for the delegates to share their own opinions and respond to those of others. The table facilitator would then summarize the discussion through the iPad.
5. Quite often the Process Team would request Delegate Surveys. The iPad would be handed around the table to each delegate so that personal assessments of varied topics could be individually submitted.
6. After an allotted time the Delegate Survey Results would be displayed for everyone. Reactions were varied. Some delegates felt the response percentages were closely aligned with their own, while others confided their surprise or disappointment with results.
7. Overall reaction of the Delegates seemed to be positive. Several people voiced concerns that divisive issues will continue to plague the denomination regardless of the Compelling Vision outcome.

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 2,155, comprised of 677 Delegates, and 1,478 Non-Delegates. *See Attendance Chart below.*
- Total worship offerings received were tentatively announced as \$50,928.49.
- Delegate election resulted in David Sollenberger being chosen as Moderator-elect to serve as the 2021 Annual Conference moderator in Greensboro, North Carolina.
- Joyce Person was acknowledged for her years of service as lead teller.
- Church of the Brethren Association for the Arts Quilt Auction raised \$7,595 for world hunger outreach.

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- Blood Drive collected 165 units with the help of many Dedicated Volunteers.
- Grand Rapids, Michigan will be the host city of AC2020 in the DeVos Place.
- Program & Arrangements Committee announced that OMAHA, Nebraska, will be the location for AC 2022.

WORSHIP

- Leading In Worship were: Danielle Sommers, Music Coordinator; Jonathan Emmons, Organist; Lucas Finet, Piano; Nicole Walter, Keyboards; Geneva Price, Adult Choir Director; Karen Stutzman, Children’s Music Director.
- Moderator Consecration during the Sunday morning worship service installed Paul Munday as Moderator for 2020 (Grand Rapids) and David Sollenberger as Moderator-elect for 2021 (Greensboro).
- The 2020 Conference Theme will be “God’s Adventurous Future.”

SERMONS

- Wednesday Evening, JULY 3 : Moderator Donita Keister - Compelling-Upheld-Propelled-By-Christ Associate Pastor, BUFFALO VALLEY, Mifflinburg, Pennsylvania
- Thursday Evening, JULY 4 : Jonathan Prater - Pedicures, Preparation, And Proclamation Pastor of MT. ZION, Linville, Virginia
- Friday Evening, JULY 5 : Audrey & Tim Hollenberg-Duffey - Did I Choose This Family Ministry Team Leaders, HAGERSTOWN, Hagerstown, Maryland
- Saturday Evening, JULY 6 : Jeremy Ashworth - Service And The Savior Pastor of CIRCLE OF PEACE, Peoria, Arizona
- Sunday Morning, JULY 7 : Tim Harvey - Proclaiming Christ As Lord Pastor at OAK GROVE, Roanoke, Virginia

ATTENDANCE

