

2016 Annual Conference Delegate Report

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

The 230th Annual Conference (June 29 - July 3, 2016) 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. The adjacent Sheraton Hotel is a member of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., and their Starwood Preferred Planner program is the largest reward and recognition program for meeting planners in the hotel industry. Across the parking lot was a Shopping Mall offering a variety of dining options in a food court that was frequented by Conference goers.

David Steele, the 2015 Moderator will assume the responsibilities of the denominations General Secretary on September 1, 2016. He was introduced by Mission and Ministry Board chair Don Fitzkee during the Church of the Brethren report. The delegate body also expressed their gratitude to Interim General Secretary Dale Minnich, especially since his responsibilities broadened after the sudden death of Associate General Secretary Mary Jo Flory-Steury in March 2016. Duties of the General Secretary include but not limited to the following:

- *Convenes the executive officers of the church as the Leadership Team*
- *Facilitates the development of the Church of the Brethren Executive Forum Leadership*
- *Articulates and interprets the mission, vision and core values of the Church of the Brethren, Inc.*
- *Reports to Annual Conference as the principle staff executive for Church of the Brethren, Inc.*
- *Reports to Standing Committee the work of the Leadership Team*
- *Coordinates arrangements and agenda for the Inter-Agency Forum*
- *Understands and directs the implementation of Annual Conference decisions*
- *Guides planning for all financial aspects of the Church of the Brethren and the Mission and Ministry Board*
- *Oversees management of Stewardship and Donor Development Staff*
- *Maintains and nurtures partnerships with institutions and agencies of the Church of the Brethren.*
- *Coordinates the ecumenical relationships and speaks on behalf of the Church of the Brethren as the Ecumenical Officer*

Rev. Joel Stephen Billi was elected President of Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (EYN) and began serving in that office on May 1, 2016. Billi replaces Samuel Dante Dali whose term would have expired in 2015 but was extended because of the terrorist conditions that affected the church in Nigeria. President Billi well understands the persecution climate of northeast Nigeria, having served several large congregations at Biu, Utaku, Maiduguri, and most recently at Michika which is considered on the front lines of the terrorist insurgency.

SPECIAL NOTES:

- 5 New Fellowships were recognized: New Beginnings and Veritas in Atlantic Northeast District, Jonah’s People in Northern Ohio District, Betel International and Ministerio Uncion Apostolica in Southeastern District, and Gospel Assembly in Atlantic Southeast District.
- Witness to the Host City gifts were placed in Small Rooms due to lack of space at the front of the conference ballroom. Donations this year went to BackPack Beginnings which grew from a young mother using her dining room table into a volunteer network that serves the needs of over 4,000 children. Donations were also given to the Encore! Boutique Thrift Store, a ministry of First Presbyterian Church’s Step Up Program that provides professional grade clothing for people interviewing for new jobs. Additional cash donations amounted to \$2,793.

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- Steven Schweitzer, Academic Dean at Bethany Theological Seminary presented morning biblical studies centering on Light in Scripture: Study 1, Study 2, Study 3.

OFFICERS:

- 2016 Conference Officers were Moderator Andy Murray, member of Stone Church of the Brethren in Huntingdon, PA; Moderator-elect Carol Scheppard, vice president and dean for Academic Affairs at Bridgewater College; and Secretary Jim Beckwith, Pastor of Annville Church of the Brethren in Annville, Pennsylvania.

BUSINESS-SESSIONS:

- Delegate seating around tables has become the Conference standard. This innovation from AC2012 frequently offered delegates the opportunity to participate in Table Talk discussions concerning business and personal matters.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

- UB 1 Vision of Ecumenism for the 21st Century (interim report was received)
- UB 2 Review and Evaluation (interim report was received)
- UB 3 Vitality and Viability of the denomination (interim report was received)

NEW BUSINESS:

- NB 1 Same Sex Weddings from 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.”* By a motion from the floor was referred to the Leadership Team of the Church of the Brethren, and 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.”*
- NB 2 On Earth Peace Reportability / Accountability was accepted per the recommendation of the 2016 Standing Committee, that both queries (*Reportability/Accountability to Annual Conference from West Marva District*) and (*Viability of On Earth Peace as an Agency from Southeastern District*) be

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combined into one item of business, and be referred to the Review and Evaluation Committee for a report in 2017, stating: *“recognizing that the Review and Evaluation Committee has the responsibility to consider the balance and unity of denominational agencies.”*

The query from West Marva District questioned the Accountability and Consistency of On Earth Peace because:

- *“If Annual Conference agency status is granted, the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference is now advised of On Earth Peace Assembly’s intent and commitment to work honorably, as a full program partner, to further build the institution of the Church of the Brethren and the peaceful kingdom of God here on earth as in heaven..”* OEPA promised in their original AC1998 request to: *“...commit itself to providing ministry that is within the scope of Annual Conference directives and congruent with articulated values of the Church of the Brethren.”*
- *“...the 2015 On Earth Peace flyer that accompanied the On Earth Peace report in the Annual Conference packet referenced the scripture, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, She has anointed me to...’ referring to God as ‘She.’ This same flyer includes a picture of a rainbow-scarved pastor and the concept of Inclusion.”*
- *“...while the declared intent is to work through conflict and resolve disputes, On Earth Peace, since 2011, through report, statements, and actions, has brought more tension than peace.”*

The query from Southeastern District questioned the “Viability” of On Earth Peace as an agency because:

- *“The recent actions of On Earth Peace, during the last three years, have brought more conflict in the denomination and reflect their unwillingness to follow Annual Conference mandates or directives.”*

Each decade Annual Conference elects a Review and Evaluation Committee in the fifth year of the decade to review and evaluate the denominations structure and function, give an interim report in the sixth year, and then present a final report in the seventh year. Their mandate is to analyze the harmony between church agencies, the level of interest that Brethren exhibit in programs of the denomination, the success of denominational programs to achieve their stated goals, and the connectedness of those programs with each of the twenty-four districts.

- NB 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 elected 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 that was returned. Some microphone speakers expressed concern that the denomination should make better utilization of its finances in the area of evangelism.
- NB 4 Living Together as Christ Calls was adopted per the recommendation of the 2016 Standing Committee that it be referred to the Mission and Ministry Board. This query came from the La Verne

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Church of the Brethren which petitioned Annual Conference, *“to address the roots of our tension and develop strategies that will aid us in treating one another in a truly Christ-like manner.”*

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 2,439, comprised of 704 Delegates, and 1,735 Non-Delegates. *See Attendance Chart below.*
- Total offerings received were tentatively announced as \$68,516.00.
- Delegate election resulted in Samuel Sarpiya being chosen as Moderator-elect to serve as the 2018 Annual Conference moderator in Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Church of the Brethren Association for the Arts Quilt Auction raised \$10,050 for world hunger outreach.
- Blood Drive collected 160 units from 161 people with the help of many Dedicated Volunteers.
- Grand Rapids, Michigan will be the host city of AC2017 in the DeVos Place.
- Review all Future Locations announced by the Program & Arrangements Committee.

WORSHIP:

- Leading In Worship were: Shawn Kirchner, Music Coordinator; Jonathan Emmons, Organist; Terry Murray, Keyboards; Jesse Hopkins, Adult Choir Director; Deborah Waas, Children’s Music Director.
- Moderator Consecration during the Sunday morning worship service installed Carol Scheppard as Moderator for 2017 (Grand Rapids) and Samuel Sarpiya as Moderator-elect for 2018 (Cincinnati).
- Newly installed 2017 Moderator Scheppard shares remarks and announces the 2017 Conference Theme of Risk Hope.

SERMONS:

- Wednesday Evening, JUNE 29 : Moderator Andy Murray - SHINING THE LIGHT ON OUR STATE
Murray is retired from the faculty of Juniata College having been a professor, administrator, and chaplain.
- Thursday Evening, JUNE 30 : Kurt Borgmann - LIGHT UP THE DARKNESS
Borgmann is pastor of Manchester COB in North Manchester, Indiana.
- Friday Evening, JULY 1 : Dennis Webb - EVERY NIGHT NEEDS THE LIGHT...LET’S BE THAT LIGHT
Webb is pastor of Naperville COB in Naperville, Illinois, and a member of the denomination’s Mission and Ministry Board.
- Saturday Evening, JULY 2 : Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm - TRAILING WISPS OF GLORY
Ottoni-Wilhelm is Brightbill Professor of Preaching and Worship at Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Indiana.
- Sunday Morning, JULY 3 : Eric Brubaker - A CITY ON A HILL
Brubaker is an ordained minister serving in plural ministry at the Middle Creek COB in Lititz, Pennsylvania.