

Be Still and Know

Psalm 46:7-11

Greetings from the 51ST Annual Atlantic Northeast District Conference, held October 2-3, 2020, online via Microsoft Teams. Needless to say, this year's district conference looked very different from district conferences in the past! We did not gather at the Leffler Chapel at Elizabethtown College, instead we viewed the events from the comfort of our own living rooms. There were no microphones on the floor for people to approach with their questions or comments. These happened through a chat box on our computer screens. There were no breakout sessions or brown bag lunches, since the entire conference was condensed to 3 hours on-line. Even though we were viewing from afar, congregational singing was still part of the event, as were other musical interludes while ballots were being cast.

I'm sorry to say that I missed the worship service Friday evening and due to a technical glitch, I also missed Karen Hackett's welcome statement, even though I was on-line at the time. Technical glitches would also cause a 20-minute delay shortly after the meeting began. After that somewhat rocky start things proceeded relatively glitch-free.

Here are some of Karen's own words found in the District Conference book:

“ This verse (Ps. 46:10) and this Psalm in its entirety, resonates with each of us during this uncertain time. As I write this, COVID-19 cases are rising around our country in astounding rates, states are pulling back

their “re-opening phases”, wearing a mask has become a political issue, and I could go on and on and on. This verse is so important for us right now as children of God. Do we take the time to constantly re-connect during our busy days? Do we stop and pray? Do we take the time to find safety and security in His presence as the world spins out of control at times? ...Brothers and Sisters, this verse reminds us that God is with us through every danger we face. How blessed are we to have a loving and merciful God who will never forsake us? God is good.”

The theme for this year was taken from Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God.” Little did Karen know when she chose this theme in October of 2019, just how still we would be in 2020!

Following Karen’s welcome, we moved into the business portion of the day. Jeff Glisson, District Board Chair, reported on the ANE Way Forward Report and Covenant. The Way Forward Covenant has grown out of the discord experienced in the district these last few years, the Way Forward Report and Covenant is essentially a vision for the District as we move into the future. The executive summary of the report highlights 8 recommendations as a way forward for our district. The 8 items are as follows:

1. Adopt the proposed way forward covenant
2. Build a culture of honor, respect and humility
3. Lift up Brethren beliefs and practices throughout the district
4. Facilitate events that encourage understanding of differences

5. Embrace a district process for responding to disagreement
6. Renew a district emphasis on spiritual renewal
7. Develop strategies for shared mission-driven activities that help build unity
8. Release district time, talent, and treasure for all of the above.

There are copies of the full way forward report available on the back table, if you would like to learn more. The invitation has been extended to all district congregations to review and comment on this report and to look for ways to implement these recommendations at the local level.

Pete Kontra, ANE District Executive, was up next to give his report. He spoke of the challenges we have all faced this past year as the pandemic developed. He thanked the district staff and board members for their continued service even in these difficult times. He spoke of the challenges of working with congregations leaving the district, either over issues of theology or because they are no longer viable congregations. It was encouraging to hear that in the case of members remaining in a non-viable congregation or one that has decided to withdraw yet these members still wish to be a part of the Church of the Brethren, that the district has worked with these members to “re-home” them in other CoB congregations.

Pete also reminded all of us of the Compelling Vision statement that will be voted on at the Annual Conference next July. The statement reads: “Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.” In line with this vision Area 1 districts, which include ANE, Middle PA, Western PA, Southern PA, and Mid-Atlantic, have joined together to create the “Calling the Called” event to encourage individuals who are exploring a call to set-apart ministry, as well as bringing awareness to congregations about how to become places of calling to their members.

Jeff Glisson took the podium once again to report on the various board ministries. These ministries consist of:

- Church Development & Evangelism, which is dedicated to equipping, encouraging, and revitalizing existing congregations and planting new churches. The Seeds of Faith Fund, works in conjunction with Church Development and Stewardship commissions, and functions to birth new ministries, revitalize ANE congregations in fear of closing, to encourage leadership growth, and to support growth and expansion of congregations in need of the district’s help.
- The Nurture Commission provides opportunities and encouragement for Christian education within ANE congregations. It also facilitates

support and advocates for the spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational health and vitality of the district's congregations. Connie, Moira, and I had the opportunity to attend one of the nurture commission's educational opportunities when we traveled to the Mountville Church of the Brethren to hear Marie Monville, former wife of the Nickel Mines schoolhouse shooter, and Donald Kraybill speak about forgiveness and healing following that tragic event. I have the DVD of Amish Grace, based on the story of the Nickel Mines shooting and the outpouring of grace and forgiveness that followed. We also have a copy of Marie Monville's book telling her story, which you are welcome to borrow (once Moira is done reading it).

- The ministry commission dedicates their time to interviewing licensing and ordination candidates, planning educational events, streamlining policies and procedures, processing ministry concerns, receiving updates on pastoral placements, and praying over ANE ministers. There was a time to recognize significant events in the lives of ANE district pastors and students. George Snavely, of the Elizabethtown congregation, was recognized for 50 years of service. I received a shoutout as one of two recently ordained ministers in the district. Other recognition was given for new licensed ministers, those who have served interim assignments, those who have been placed in new positions, as well as graduates of the ACTS and SEBAH, the Spanish language equivalent of ACTS, programs. Mentioned in memorium were Floyd Bantz of the Mountville

congregation, William Longenecker of Stevens Hill, and Jobie Riley from Elizabethtown. Just yesterday I received a note from the ministry commission saying they were praying over my ministry, as I imagine they are for all pastors during pastor appreciation month. I also want to take just a moment to thank all of you for your generous gift of appreciation. I am deeply moved by the outpouring of love and support I have experienced from my earliest days here at Hatfield.

- The witness and outreach commission supports the vision of the Way Forward Covenant through several programs: Church 2 Church which allows churches in need to partner with churches interested in service projects; Brethren Disaster Ministries which hosted volunteers from 2 ANE congregations in 2020; Hispanic and Latino ministries helps to grow Hispanic and Latino leaders and congregations in the ANE district; Barnabas Fund exists to provide financial assistance for ministry-driven needs; and Helping Hands Benevolence Fund provides funds to congregations to help respond to natural disasters and social ills in the ANE district, including COVID-19 response.
- Stewardship commission holds responsibility for the financial assets and affairs of the district, as well as promoting stewardship education.

Here are a few fun facts about the ANE district. The ANE district is the second largest of the 24 Church of the Brethren districts. With 76 congregations, fellowships and projects, our District holds 11% of all the COB memberships. The ANE is diverse in area, locations, size, ethnicity, and

styles of worship. The oldest COB church (also known as COB's Mother Church), Germantown, is located within our District and we also continue to support new church planting. Our boundaries extended as far north as Maine and as far south as Delaware.

Just as individual congregations have needed to keep a close eye on their finances, the District has also been impacted by the current economic situation. Ray Flagg, District Treasurer, was pleased to report that the District has managed to contain expenses and that we are in a good financial position. The delegates voted to affirm the proposed Fair Share goal of \$55 per member, with a stretch goal of \$60 per member for the coming year.

Reports from Church of the Brethren agencies came next. Tom Fritz reported that although there was no Disaster Relief Auction this year, there are plans to hold a live auction September 24-25, 2021. Delegates were encouraged to give to BDRA to keep their work going, even though there was no relief auction this year. Congregations were also encouraged to consider holding smaller events or collections to benefit BDRA.

Tom Courtright, the new director of Camp Swatara, shared that although retreats are down, they are continuing. There were no summer camps this year, but the family camp was open at 75% capacity. This downtime at the camp has been used to make improvements thanks to gifts that have been received. One improvement was the installation of a disc golf course. The

staff at the camp are envisioning new ways of engaging people, even in the slow times.

Elizabethtown College reports 450 new students and again is highly ranked in the US News college survey. The new sports and fitness center has been completed and is in use by students. The college is in the process of rebranding, so be on the lookout for a new look for Etown.

Linda Byers spoke about the youth ministry, geared to students in grades 6-12. At the leadership meeting held this past February there were 15 churches represented. She reported that youth have been creative during these days of COVID, the group has worked with Camp Swatara on programming, and she invites churches to contact her to discuss youth opportunities.

Bethany Seminary is currently offering 13 graduate programs and 10 leadership programs. This year learning is both online and in-person. Scholarships are available to make learning accessible to as many students as possible. Bethany has also entered into a cooperative agreement with Columbia University.

Donna Rhodes, of the Susquehanna Valley Ministry Center, reported that due to COVID a number of classes were cancelled or moved online this year. Hybrid classes will be offered this semester. The Calling the Called events that were originally scheduled for September and October this year have been postponed to 2021.

COBYS, youth and family services, celebrated 40 years of service. They offer foster and adoptive services, as well as counseling, reunification work and family life education.

Because we were not able to gather together in one place and offer recognition to those who have been licensed, ordained, or commissioned, there will be a ministry recognition event held in the Spring of 2021.

The last portion of the conference is one that is familiar to anyone who has attended conferences in the past, and that is the transfer of leadership from the current moderator to the moderate-elect. Karen Hackett graciously passed the mantle of leadership to Scott Moyer, who along with the new moderator-elect, John Hostetter, will take the district into 2021. Scott's selected theme for the coming year is "Be Renewed in Christ", taken from Colossians 3:8-17.

I took note of the fact that unlike years past, there were very few questions or comments during the program. Only a few questions were asked about the congregations that were being disorganized and Pete Kontra addressed those, again noting that some were considered no longer viable to continue as active congregations.

It was my pleasure to serve as the delegate for the Hatfield Church of the Brethren again this year. I look forward to having the opportunity again in the future.

As I've been reflecting on what was shared at conference and what we are seeing in the news every day, the thought has occurred to me that "normal" is

not something we will ever return to. Nor should we. The more I've thought about this the more I believe we should not be hoping for a return to "normal". Perhaps we are to use this time to ask God to lead us into a time of "better". We should be asking God to help us see our similarities with people who are different from us, to listen to their stories to learn who they really are, just as we would hope they will do the same for us. We should be asking God for an increase in our own compassion for those less fortunate than us, to seek ways to raise them up without fearing tearing ourselves down. Just as Mordecai counseled Esther that she had been made queen "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14), I believe the church, the gathered body, as God's representative on earth, should use its power "for such a time as this". We can do this if we are willing to be still and know God and his will, then respond to his call in this place and time. May it be so!

Lynne McMullan Allebach

October 18, 2020 Hatfield Church of the Brethren