

God is Calling – Report on Annual Conference

Ezekiel 2:1-5

Mark 6:1-13

Greetings from the 234th recorded Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren held...in my living room! Unlike all 233 Annual Conferences prior to this one, in 2021 the first ever virtual Annual Conference was held as a result of the on-going COVID pandemic. You may be aware that the pandemic caused the cancellation of the 2020 Annual Conference. Thanks to the many wonders of technology, people from around the world were able to attend this year's Conference from wherever they call home. The Conference began on Wednesday, June 30, and will wrap up at 11:00 am today with the closing worship service. I hope some of you were able to view the evening worship services.

The theme this year was God's Adventurous Future. Daily Bible studies conducted by Dr. Michael Gorman. Dr. Gorman holds the Raymond E. Brown Chair in Biblical Studies and Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland. He is also the author of several books and published articles. Dr. Gorman focused on verses from the Book of Revelation. He spoke on "A future informed by Scripture", "A future sharpened through risk", and "A future dependent on prayer."

Over the past several years delegates and non-delegates have had the opportunity to meet around tables to share their thoughts on the business

at hand. This year we met at virtual tables, accessed by the click of a button on our computer screens. One of the functions of delegates to Conference is to vote on the slate of nominees to fill various positions within the Church. This year we voted on the delayed ballot from 2020, as well as the fresh slate of nominees for 2021. Because of the cancellation of the 2020 Conference, length of terms have been adjusted. Those people who were scheduled to leave positions in 2020 were asked to serve an additional year. Those who were elected in the delayed ballot will serve one less year than a normal term. With the election of the 2021 slate of nominees, we have returned to the normal rotation in length of terms. Some of the elections of note:

On the 2020 delayed ballot:

Tim McElwee was elected as moderator-elect,

Beth Jarrett for program and arrangements committee,

For Mission & Ministry Board, Area 1 (which includes the Atlantic Northeast District to which we belong), Josiah Ludwick,

For Mission & Ministry Board, Area 4, Kathy A. Mack,

On the 2021 ballot:

Kim Ebersole for program and arrangements committee,

For Mission & Ministry Board, Area 3, Phillip C. Stone, Jr.

For Mission & Ministry Board, Area 5, Barbara Date

There were the usual reports from the various Conference agencies, beginning with Program and Arrangements. Chris Douglas reported on the behind-the-scenes work that has taken place over the past 15 months to bring the virtual Conference to fruition. It was also reported that with this Conference Chris is retiring after 12 years at her post. It was announced that, if all goes well, the Annual Conference will be meeting in Omaha, Nebraska, in 2022. It was noted that the dates for future meetings may be different as the Program and Arrangements Committee worked to get the best possible rates for the Conference and its attendees at convention centers and hotels. Other future Conferences will be held in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 2023, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2024.

Other reports on the first full day of Conference came from On Earth Peace, which has grown their program to include even more paid interns, and Bethany Seminary. Jeff Carter, president of Bethany Seminary, gave an upbeat report on the state of the seminary. They continue to focus on access and affordability. Tuition has been frozen for the 2021-2022 academic year as a response to the financial hardships posed by the pandemic. With a base rate of \$1,100 per semester for full-time students who qualify for scholarships and other financial aid, Bethany remains a remarkably affordable option for students. Partnering with other institutions, Bethany is actively recruiting international students at the seminary. Technology centers in the US and Nigeria make studying at Bethany accessible to a wider range of students.

Saturday reports included reports from the delegates to Christian Churches Together, National Council of Churches, and World Council of Churches. All these groups have felt the impact of the global pandemic yet continue to work for God's peace to invade our world. Brethren Benefit Trust presented a video explaining their many services and announcing interest in marketing their services to others outside of the Church of the Brethren, as well as a possible renaming to reflect service to a wider circle. The Mission and Ministry Board reported on some of the obstacles to service and creative resolutions discovered to continue their various ministries around the globe: Global Food Initiative, Brethren Disaster Ministries, Children's Disaster Services, Brethren Voluntary Service, and the Healing Racism Initiative. Both BBT and Mission and Ministry Board were able to offer COVID grants to help members through the pandemic.

Friday morning's plenary session speaker Tod Bolsinger, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of several books, presented "Doing Church in Uncharted Territory". Tod is a powerful speaker who spoke about how to do church in a post-Christendom, post-pandemic world. This was a call to leaders in the church to be prepared to lead the change needed to enter God's Adventurous Future.

As had been previously decided, there would be no queries addressed at Conference. The focus would be on the Compelling Vision proposal.

Friday afternoon and Saturday morning were spent in our table groups discussing how the proposed Compelling Vision resonated with our local churches as well as how it reflects the spirit of the Church of the Brethren as a whole. This is the Compelling Vision:

“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.”

Questions for our consideration were:

How does the compelling vision reflect the soul of the Church of the Brethren?

What are the needs in your community that might be healed by the radical and holistic peace of Jesus Christ?

How might we work at calling and equipping innovative, adaptable, and fearless disciples to live out the Jesus in the Neighborhood vision?

What challenges might we face as we live into the Jesus in the Neighborhood vision in our communities? One of our table members is a black pastor from the Chicago area who shared that when he went door knocking in his neighborhood, while he was generally well received, at one house he was met by a white woman holding her cell phone telling

him to go away or she would call the police. Racism is a challenge in many communities.

What new steps could congregations take to more closely align your way of life with the Jesus in the Neighborhood vision?

The final question was, “How are you going to use your gifts to meet the Jesus in the Neighborhood vision?”

The responses to these various questions were tallied and shared. This led to the time to affirm the proposed Compelling Vision. There were four statements to choose from:

I am inspired and wholeheartedly affirm the Vision

I affirm the Vision

I have reservations but will set them aside and affirm the Vision for the good of the body

I cannot affirm the vision

There were 450 responses with 369 affirming the Compelling Vision statement and 81 that did not affirm the statement. The percentage of those who chose to affirm was 82% of the total responses. This was a happy ending to three years of work done by the Compelling Vision committee and over 3,000 people at Annual Conference and in small group meetings.

With the affirmation of the Compelling Vision, we look forward to moving into God's Adventurous Future. It is a future that God is calling the Church of the Brethren to embrace. But as we heard in today's Scripture readings and in Tod Bolsinger's presentation, we can expect that some will not be willing to hear what we have to say. That's okay. God is with us, and His Will will prevail.

With that in mind, I ask once again that we dream a dream, one that if time and money are not issues, how can Hatfield Church of the Brethren seek to be Jesus in the Neighborhood in our community. I look forward to hearing from you.