

UB 2 Query: Breaking Down Barriers – Increasing Access to Denominational Events

Brethren uphold the ideal that all congregations and all members should be equally represented at Annual Conference and other meetings, and we value the voice and participation of the entire body, all our members, to the fullest extent possible, as together we seek the mind of Christ.

Nevertheless, barriers to full and equal participation in wider church events, such as Annual Conference, exist due to factors such as:

- travel (distance, time, complexity, and cost);
- obstacles to travel (which might include pandemic travel restrictions, identification requirements, or others);
- cost of meals and accommodations;
- necessity of being away from home or work for extended periods of time; and
- physical obstacles, and less-than-ideal accessibility on-site.

Brethren from the West, from Puerto Rico, minorities, those with disabilities, those who are economically disadvantaged, and those with on-going work or family responsibilities, are especially impacted by these barriers, resulting in their being under-represented at such meetings. These factors also impact international Brethren.

We hold the realities of these barriers in tension with our ideals.

However, there is hope, as our world has changed and is still changing – as even we Brethren have experienced:

- 21st Century technologies now exist to help people and groups overcome barriers and share access easily. These resources are more accessible, secure, and cost-effective than ever before.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed us the opportunity to experience first-hand some of the rich possibility for technology to bring us together for worship and business, fellowship and connection. Many congregations have effectively used these technologies, including even home-bound members who were not able to participate previously.
- Online denominational events, beginning with the Love Feast in April 2020, reached many times the number of participants of recent Annual Conferences, and included Brethren from all over the world who could never have participated in person.
- Many district board meetings and conferences have been held online. They have included worship, reports, and secure methods for voting on business items.
- Alternative meeting strategies can allow good stewardship choices, reducing costs as well as environmental impacts that contribute to climate change.

In light of these observations, we are convinced that our current polity, which restricts voice and vote at Annual Conference to only those who have the ability,

time, and resources to be physically present, no longer serves us well. Therefore, we, the Living Stream Church of the Brethren – the denomination’s fully online congregation – feel that this is the proper time in our life together to raise the following question:

Should the Brethren explore the possibilities of how we can faithfully, in good order and with proper representation, use technology to remove barriers and facilitate the full participation of delegates and those desiring to be present for Annual Conference and other events, who might be better served – and could better serve the body – from a distance?

Approved and passed on to the Living Stream congregational body with the full unanimous consensus of the Living Stream Church of the Brethren church board at their regular board meeting, August 11, 2020.

Moderator, Sam Gahm

Approved and passed on to the Pacific Northwest District Board with the full unanimous consensus of the Living Stream Church of the Brethren congregation gathered in a specially called congregational meeting, August 16, 2020.

Moderator, Sam Gahm

Received with appreciation and support, and passed on to the Pacific Northwest District Conference by the Pacific Northwest District Board meeting online August 26, 2020.

Board Chair, Howard Ullery

Clerk, Carol Bowman

Approved by full consensus of the Pacific Northwest District Conference meeting online September 19, 2020.

Moderator, Ben Green

Clerk, Carol Bowman

Action of the 2022 Annual Conference: Pastoral team member Enten Eller explained the origin of the query from the Living Stream congregation, and District Executive Glenn Brumbaugh expressed the support of the Pacific Northwest District for the query. Standing Committee delegate Mary Lorah-Hammond from Michigan District presented Standing Committee’s recommendation. *Annual Conference adopted Standing Committee’s recommendation that the Query: Breaking Down Barriers – Increasing Access to Denominational Events be adopted and that Annual Conference create a study committee to examine the theological, philosophical, and practical implications of the query along with a feasibility study. The committee is to bring recommendations to the 2024 Annual Conference.*

The committee will consist of three (3) persons elected by Annual Conference who are familiar with denominational events; issues related to broad accessibility; virtual/hybrid meetings and/or webcasting. The committee will consult with the Di-

1 *rector of Annual Conference, the Annual Conference webcast coordinator, and oth-*
2 *ers as determined by the committee. In subsequent action, Annual Conference*
3 *elected Jeanne Davies, Brandon Grady, and Daniel Poole to serve as members of*
4 *this study committee.*

5 **2023 Interim Report**

6 7 **Year One - Framing the Study**

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9 Our first task was organizing ourselves as a committee and determining roles
10 and responsibilities. In our first meeting, which included the Director of Annual
11 Conference and the Annual Conference webcast coordinator, we decided after
12 much discussion and healthy debate that Jeanne Davies would fill the role of
13 secretary and carry the task of taking minutes and keeping the team organized
14 and Dan Poole would take on the task of chairing the committee.

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16 Framing our work in simple terms, we are charged with considering how the de-
17 nomination might enlarge the tent of participation to those who have met bar-
18 riers toward full inclusion. At first glance, the call of this query seems to resonate
19 deeply with the spirit and ethos that we Brethren like to inhabit. How could one
20 in good conscience argue with the call to enlarge the tent of meeting so that
21 more might be welcome to attend? In this regard, it addresses a powerful and
22 positive inclination of our people to value the gathered community and the in-
23 trinsic worth of each individual. We intend to draw upon these good intentions
24 and determine how they might inform the recommendations we plan to bring.

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26 However, we know that this question is not simple at all. We are aware that our
27 recommendations will carry many potentially far-reaching implications. There-
28 fore, we recognize that what is required as we examine the theological, philo-
29 sophical, and practical implications of this question is navigating our way
30 toward a complex and nuanced set of recommendations. We feel the full weight
31 of knowing that, as we examine this potential future path, the denominational
32 meeting process will likely emerge in an unfamiliar and strange place. But it is
33 not our task to determine what that future will look like but, to the best of our
34 abilities, faithfully discern what that new path might necessarily be.

35 36 **Our Initial Work**

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38 After organizing ourselves, we dug into the work with dedication and determi-
39 nation. We have been meeting every other week since our inception. An essential
40 first step has been to determine the scope of our work. Careful attention to what
41 we are meant to address and what lies outside those bounds is a constant refrain
42 in our work together.

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44 Some preliminary work has included scanning through and digesting several
45 documents, which would provide background information on how this ques-
46 tion has already been addressed. As we address the query, we intend to draw

context from this prior investigative work. These documents included: responses 1
from some earlier Annual Conference participation surveys, three different An- 2
nual Conference statements on accessibility, and the Doing Annual Conference 3
Differently Proposal from the Leadership Team. 4

As we sought to gain some new insights in our pursuit of information, we cre- 5
ated a denomination-wide survey to capture some initial data regarding how 6
well participants feel Annual Conference and other larger denominational meet- 7
ings are serving us. You all should have received this survey. We appreciate your 8
participation and value what you have to say about these critical questions. 9
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Additionally, we have developed a strategy for inviting a few identified individ- 11
uals to sit in on several focus group listening sessions that we intend to conduct 12
over the spring and summer months of this year. These focus groups have been 13
organized to address the three categories of our investigation – the theological, 14
the philosophical, and the practical. 15
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As we launch into this research, we are keeping the following considerations in 17
mind: 18
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1. A thorough review of previous statements to build upon insights that have 20
already been gathered. 21
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2. The values that inform the Church of the Brethren ethos and substance. 23
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3. A listing of the critical identified barriers to full participation: 25
a) travel (distance, time, complexity, and cost) 26
b) obstacles to travel (which might include pandemic travel restrictions, 27
identification requirements, or others) 28
c) cost of meals and accommodations 29
d) necessity of being away from home or work for extended periods, result- 30
ing in lost earned wages 31
e) physical obstacles and on-site physical restrictions 32
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We held the first of these focus group listening sessions when committee mem- 34
ber Brandon Grady and the Director of Annual Conference, Rhonda Pittman 35
Gingrich, met with the Council of District Executives during CODE’s annual 36
winter meeting in Florida. As of this writing, we have only done a preliminary 37
review of the data gained in that listening session. More review of this data will 38
be necessary as we lay this information alongside what is learned through the 39
other focus group listening sessions. 40
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Next Steps 42

1. Formulate a meeting schedule to facilitate the remaining focus group listen- 43
ing sessions. 44
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- 1 2. Configure a method to assess the large amount of data that we anticipate
2 receiving from the surveys and listening sessions. Much of this data will be
3 anecdotal. This type of data is time-consuming to digest and challenging to
4 evaluate in order to develop a meaningful summary.
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- 6 3. Once the data has been summarized, frame out a feasibility study to address
7 the necessary resources for and practicality of carrying out any recommen-
8 dations of the committee.
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10 **Conclusion**

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12 We appreciate the trust granted to us by the Annual Conference delegate body,
13 and we will continue to faithfully tend to this work as we are able. We trust that
14 an appropriate response can be reached through God's leading and patient di-
15 rection.
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17 **The Study Committee Members**

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19 Jeanne Davies, recorder
20 Brandon Grady
21 Dan Poole, convenor
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