



engaging in faithful conversations

*to enable the spiritual transformation of the Church of the Brethren in the Plains to Pacific region and beyond*

[www.pproundtable.org](http://www.pproundtable.org)

## **A Call for Faithful Conversations about Diversity, Inclusivity and Spiritual Discernment in the Church of the Brethren**

We believe it is timely for “A Call for Faithful Conversation about Inclusivity, Diversity and Spiritual Discernment in the Church of the Brethren”. The purpose of this document is to encourage many voices to engage in meaningful conversations about these and other issues facing individuals and congregations of the Church of the Brethren.

This is a living and incomplete document. We welcome comments, contributions and amendments that will help move the conversation forward in the spirit of our mission, namely, to enable the spiritual transformation of the Church of the Brethren in the Plains to Pacific region and beyond.

Visit our website; contact information for the PPR Executive Committee is at end of this document.

### **Section A: The Significance of Inclusivity and Diversity for our Church**

#### **A Vision of Inclusivity and Diversity for Congregations**

*The congregation consists of diverse types of people living in a variety of relationships and circumstances. Unlike those groups whose membership is restricted to a certain segment of the population, the congregation appropriately includes people who differ in racial and ethnic backgrounds, economic status, sex, age, and physical and mental abilities. If a congregation becomes exclusive rather than inclusive, it denies its God-given heritage.*

-1999 Annual Conference Statement, *Calling and Ordination*

The congregation is the faith-based community in which we seek God, express our faith, and do Church. The congregation is often a bridge between the individual soul and the soul of the larger body – our denomination. So, we believe that congregations are a necessary and fruitful place for faithful conversations about inclusivity, diversity and spiritual discernment. Faithful conversations in congregations can build environments which empower individuals with differences, distinctions and diversities and allows for persons to engage in ways that honor and respect our many stories, enable us to listen to one another with empathy, and build a new understanding about one another. We believe that such respect, listening and understanding within and between congregations will bring us closer to one another, one heart and one

community at a time, and it will also move us along the pathway to becoming the church we long to be – a community of congregations and a denomination that includes and celebrates all of us.

Draft for Conversation

## **Marginalization is Real – and is Really a Problem**

*Discrimination always benefits someone.*

*-Richard America*

As the Church of the Brethren, we strive to be faithful to Jesus and seek to build congregations which reflect the Spirit of Christ and the Kingdom of God. Yet, we have often fallen short of our own vision for ourselves – a vision inspired and informed by Scripture and the will of God. As individuals, and as groups, we have hurt one another in words, actions, silence and inaction. Within congregations, one or two voices have become dominant, talking over all other voices. We call for and seek diversity without knowing how to welcome those who are not like ourselves. We have excluded some and have only partially included others, within spoken and unspoken boundaries. Consequentially, some groups and individuals are unduly privileged, with disproportionate representation in positions of influence and power in congregations and in the denomination. As a result, there are many in our congregations and communities, and throughout the Church of the Brethren, who would like to be part of our congregations but experience marginalization which keeps them apart from significant, meaningful participation.. Marginalization is a structural and social process that denies access to groups of individuals through overt and covert attitudes and practices of those who hold power and influence.

Intentionally and unintentionally, stemming from historic patterns and modern prejudices, the Church of the Brethren has marginalized whole groups of people. This marginalization not only prohibits the church's call to minister to all peoples, it also restricts our church in its ability to creatively and effectively minister in an increasingly diverse society. Those marginalized are unable to positively contribute to the life of the church and the church is unable positively contribute to their lives. The result of which has been profound, spiritual pain and isolation.

It is difficult to establish universally accepted language to discuss the status quo: Social, psychological, political, economic and theological constructs that bestow unearned privilege upon some and marginalize others. We often use the term “marginalized” to name and address the inequities experienced by individuals and groups whose identities are different from what is considered “mainstream”. Other language includes “minority-majority”, “inclusive-exclusive-elitism”, “normative”, “privilege”, “oppression”, and “discrimination”.

Sometimes the term “justice” is used a way of describing the social “injustices” we strive to change. It is certain that over time the language will continue to shift and that even in writing this we have struggled to find the right words as we to have attempted to talk about something that is very difficult and can lead to more unintentional offense and pain.

Unfortunately, for both those who are marginalized and those who are not, the problems can feel too large and too pervasive to fix. But conceding defeat is not an option for the church or for congregations, for it would be the death knell for the Kingdom of God for which we strive. Therefore, we must acknowledge that marginalization is real – and that it is really a problem. And, we must be fully committed to having faithful conversations and addressing the problems and dynamics of both marginalization and privilege. This is necessary work for our denomination and for congregations as we work toward a church that is multi-voice, diverse, inclusive and equitable – beloved communities imaging the Kingdom of God among and within us.

Draft for Conversation

## **Significant Lessons from the Early Church and Early Brethren**

*(Adapted from a PPR Paper: inclusivity and Spiritual Discernment: Keys to the Kingdom, 2010)*

*You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. Ephesians 2:19-21*

We, the Church of the Brethren, are engaged in divisive struggles with issues of identity, beliefs and practices. The early Church, too, struggled with issues of identity, beliefs and practices. Out of their struggles, *the early followers of Jesus opted for inclusivity and acceptance* rather than a specific culturally-defined ethno-religious identity. The core of the early Jesus movement was based on the life and teachings of Jesus and on interpretations arising from their dialogue and reflection about Jesus and his message about the Kingdom of God.

The Church of the Brethren originated in a small community of believers who in defining their faith and practices, followed the life and teachings of the New Testament Jesus which pivoted on *a process of spiritual discernment* involving (a) interpretations based on dialogue and reflection, and (b) practical experiences in daily living, followed by (c) further interpretation based on further dialogue and reflection. There was a living faith, not merely a creedal faith, tested and made relevant by and for the community of believers themselves.

We believe that these patterns of the early Church and the early Brethren, *inclusivity and spiritual discernment*, are instructive for us today and for the position and prospects of the Church of the Brethren. We believe that the well-being of the Church, now and for the future, can be served by these keys to the Kingdom of God on earth. In the increasingly culturally diverse contexts of our era, the Church will benefit from (a) focus on the life and teachings of Jesus, (b) emphasis on inclusivity rather than exclusivity among believers, and (c) commitment to spiritual discernment through dialogue and interpretation, practice and experience for daily living, and further interpretation and reflection

Accordingly, we strongly encourage the Church of the Brethren to re-engage with each other in a renewed spirit of spiritual discernment, dialogue, interpretation and reflection and to practice inclusivity amongst ourselves and with others, in the spirit of love and an open table of fellowship as shown to us by Jesus.

Further, we encourage the Church of the Brethren to intentionally embrace inclusivity by acknowledging and promoting polyculturalism in its church-building and church planting strategies. We encourage congregations and the Church to commit to processes of spiritual discernment in worship and community to be enriched by the broad cultural and spiritual diversity of our societies and our circumstances, while remaining true to the teachings and life of Jesus, and to thus avoid being strictly enscribed by our traditional identities or customs only.

### **Committing to the Work Ahead of Us**

*Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as quantitative change in our lives.*

-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Those sensitive to the struggles of those who are marginalized within the church often respond with compassion, offering personal support and encouragement to those aggrieved. This caring response is not enough to change the deep systemic issues that are at the heart of this problem. We need a firm, imaginative and stubbornly persistent commitment to education, advocacy, training, assessment, introspection, mentoring and grace are necessary in order to begin to dismantle the barriers that inhibit the equality, fairness and justice within the church that we seek.

Recent studies of the problems of marginalization and privilege have identified the interconnectivity among the groups which are not permitted equal participation in our society. At this moment, we are aware of and have particular concern for women, people of color, and the LGBT community. Within the common experience of being marginalized, each of these groups has important differences in realities and solutions. Believing it is important for those who are often pushed to the margins, disenfranchised, oppressed or otherwise excluded to have the opportunity to speak to their unique situation –we are including with this paper (Section B) an in-depth consideration for each the above groups and specific recommendations for addressing their concerns at individual and congregational levels.

If there are others who are marginalized for other aspects of their identity which want to be included in this conversation, we invite them to add their perspectives and insights. We are, for example, aware of discrimination against individuals and congregations who are visible and/or vocal supporters of marginalized people, especially lgbt people. Because authentic conversation is critical for spiritual discernment, we call upon individuals, congregations and the denomination to listen and respect one another and to hear the voices of marginalized people and advocates of marginalized people with a desire for understanding.

At this stage of conversation, we believe that change will begin at the grassroots level –within individuals, congregations, and communities. It is by changing ourselves that we will transform society as a whole. To that end, the individuals who have shared visions of the church we want to become, hope that individuals and congregations reading this document will:

- Share it with one another as a way of initiating and continuing conversations with one another about marginalization and privilege
- Implement the actions and recommendations made in the later part of this paper that would address the concerns in your contexts
- Continue your education about these concerns so that you can be an advocate in your context and where you are a part of the circle of influence
- Hold us all in prayer as we seek new ways of relating to one another and developing a system that holds us all equally as we are in the heart of God.

## **Section B: Listening to the Voices of Marginalized Persons and Groups**

*Section B will include conversation from the voices of various marginalized persons and groups. This section of the document is being developed and processes for engaging conversations are being pursued. We are planning for drafts of subsections to be available for comment and conversation early in 2015. The subsections will include the following:*

### **Voices of Diverse and Multi-cultural Groups**

### **Voices of Women in the Church**

### **Voices of the Queer Community**

### **Voices of Others Marginalized**

*The document will also have an appendix that will accommodate various materials, conversation and contributions that are helpful to the purpose and process of this conversation.*

## Section C: Actions to Promote Inclusivity and Diversity within the Church

### Commitment and Understanding

- **Firm Statement of Intent** – How a problem is named and understood has a profound impact upon the solutions that present themselves. In this case, it is vital to not only note that some groups and individuals are marginalized, but more significantly, to acknowledge that other groups and individuals are unduly privileged, with disproportionate representation in positions of influence and power. A stated commitment to addressing the dynamics of both marginalization and privilege is essential in order to move towards building a genuinely inclusive church.
- **Research** - We propose that the Office of Ministry be tasked with the responsibility of conducting research about the experience of minority and/or marginalized individuals within the Church of the Brethren in order to discern the points of difficulty and frustration and more fully understand the barriers that prohibit the full participation of all in the life of the church. What are the statistics and what are they telling us? What systemic, attitudinal and behavioral roadblocks do individuals encounter? How do such roadblocks impact their career choices and/or commitment to the Church of the Brethren? What are the best practices of districts that are doing better in terms of a more diverse and inclusive leadership? What ideas do those who are marginalized have to address the problems within the church? What do they need from the church in order to be able to fully contribute their gifts to the life and leadership of the church?
- **Education** – Prejudices and stereotypes tend to linger even when they are shown to be false or inaccurate. A commitment to a multi-cultural and inclusive church also requires a commitment to undoing negative stereotypes and building bridges of respect and appreciation for cultural differences that may exist. An expectation for cultural competency on the part of pastors is an important step in preparing leadership for the future. Furthermore, we call upon the church to take seriously its own call for ongoing education and conversation with lgbt people in order to counter the “widespread fear, hatred and harassment of homosexual persons” that continues to persist within the Church of the Brethren.

### Advocacy and Support for Inclusivity and Diversity

- **Advocacy** – Individuals from marginalized groups frequently lack role models and mentors who might naturally provide support, guidance and advocacy. We propose that a program be developed whereby individuals from marginalized groups can be paired with a caring advocate to help navigate complicated systems of access and opportunity.
- **Support** – Often the best support comes from being with others who share a similar experience. We encourage districts and the denomination to very intentionally provide opportunities for marginalized individuals to meet in order to provide mutual support, learn new coping skills, share areas of concern, and explore new ways to enhance the experience of minority groups within the Church of the Brethren.

### 6 Steps of Kingian Nonviolence

*Based on the Teachings, Philosophies, and Strategies of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

*In reviewing the suggestions for addressing marginalization, someone pointed out the overlap between our suggestions and the Kingian Steps. This is probably because the Church of the Brethren culture has been influenced by many of our people and organizations who have found inspiration and practical guidance in the 6 Steps of Kingian Nonviolence.*

*Therefore, the steps are included below to help promote our mutual understanding of how we can be agents for change.*

**Step 1: Information Gathering** – The way you determine the facts, the options for change and the timing of pressure for raising the issue is a collective process.

**Step 2: Education** – Is the process of developing articulate leaders, who are knowledgeable about the issue.

**Step 3: Personal Commitment** – Means looking at your internal and external involvement in the nonviolent campaign and preparing yourself for long-term as well as short term action.

**Step 4: Negotiation** – Is the art of bring together your views and those of your opponent to arrive at a just conclusion or clarify the unresolved issues, at which point, the conflict is formalized.

**Step 5: Direct Action** – Occurs when negotiations have broken down or failed to produce a just response to the contested issues and conditions.

**Step 6: Reconciliation** – Is the mandatory closing step of a campaign, when the opponents and proponents celebrate the victory and provide joint leadership to implement the change.

*This summary of the 6 Steps comes from The Positive, Peace Warrior Network. You can find more on their website at <http://positivepeacewarriornetwork.wordpress.com>*

### **Things Your Congregation Can Do Now**

Adapted from A PPR Paper on Building an Inclusive Church, 2014

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.*

- 1 Peter 2:9

*We affirm the need for inclusive leadership, drawn from the full gamut of the church's life. In faithfulness to the Pentecostal vision of the outpouring of God's prophetic Spirit on all flesh, the church is called to affirmative action in broadening the makeup of its leadership. Both women and men, the young and the old alike, and people from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds have essential gifts to contribute to the leading of God's people.*

-1999 Annual Conference Statement, Calling and Ordination

**Education for Your Pastor:** Equip your pastor to be an effective leader of the type of congregation you would like to be a part of by supporting her/his attendance at trainings on various aspects of privilege. This could also include sending your pastor to conferences, such as Intercultural Gatherings, Progressive Gathering, and Women's Clergy Retreat to provide them with additional learning and networking with other pastors and lay leaders who are engaging in these issues.

**Support the Pastor's Vision:** Encourage your pastor to develop ministries to address lingering prejudices and stereotypes within in the congregation. In moments when the education and conversation makes people within the congregation uncomfortable, support the pastor to continue past the point of discomfort to continue the work.

**When Looking for a Pastor:** Provide trainings and strategies for your search committee to help you understand more deeply the values, challenges, and opportunities of an inclusive church. **astoral Placement:**

- **Pastoral Search Committee Training**—As human beings, we tend to have a bias towards that which feels familiar to us, a tendency that reinforces the status quo. We propose the development of a training session for search committees that could be offered in the early stages of a search process in order to help committees understand more deeply the values, challenges and opportunities of an inclusive church.
- **Blind Profiles for Pastoral Searches** – To create a system that will minimize how our subconscious biases influence our pastoral searches, we need to remove that information from our initial profiles of candidates. We can ask for information about gender, age, race, sexual orientation, familial affiliation, etc. at later stages of the process, as and when appropriate.
- **Broad Position Postings** – We encourage congregations and districts to post position openings with Brethren-related organizations work on behalf of marginalized groups, such as Womaen's Caucus, Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests, the Intercultural Ministries Advisory Committee, the Supportive Communities Network, and Open Table Cooperative, in order to reach a broader pool of qualified candidates.

**Mentoring Congregations** – Because of the dynamics of privilege and access, individuals who are part of marginalized groups frequently have fewer opportunities for leadership development and practice. In addition, the dynamics of internalized oppression can negatively impact the self-

confidence of an individual to aspire to particular positions of leadership and influence. We would like to 6 congregations that are skilled at leadership development to consider funding year-long internships at those sites in order to help young leaders from traditional underrepresented groups to develop skills, confidence and experience.

We raise this issue, again, because despite recommendations in Annual Conference Statements such as *Becoming a Multi-Ethnic Church (Separate No More, 2007)*, *Equality for Women in the Church of the Brethren (1977)* and *Commitment of Accessibility and Inclusion (2006)*, even a very cursory view of the denomination exposes our denominations' limited success in becoming a truly inclusive church. For example:

- Women comprise less than 20% of all ordained pastors serving congregations, and many of these positions are part time. This is true even though ordination has been available to women for 55 years.
- There has not been a thorough study or report of statistics regarding the racial, ethnic and gender composition of pastoral leadership which indicates the lack of institutional attention to this concern.
- Our denominational staff is overwhelmingly white, as are the vast majority of district executives and pastors.
- The Brethren love of the "name game" creates insiders and outsiders and imposes particular challenges for those who are not "birthright" Brethren.
- Church buildings often pose physical barriers for easy access.
- Finally, our denomination actively discriminates against individuals who are openly lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, or who are visible and/or vocal supporters of lgbt people.

### **Plains to Pacific Roundtable** ([pproundtable.org](http://pproundtable.org))

PPR is a voluntary, nonprofit, thinktank group joined by Brethren dedicated to the PPR mission *to enable the spiritual transformation of the Church of the Brethren in the Plains to Pacific region and beyond*. The Executive Committee currently consists of the following persons:

Jim Lehman, Chair  
Roger Schrock, Executive Director  
Barbra Davis, CODE WEST Liaison  
Enten Eller, Treasurer, Technology Specialist  
Merlyn Kettering, Secretary

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