



Project 250

Inspired by the Past

Ever since our beginnings near the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania around 1778, the Brethren in Christ have sought to be an alternative biblical community with Jesus at its center.

Carlton Wittlinger, in his seminal history of the BIC, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, notes three emphases of the earliest River Brethren: 1) a focus on **Jesus** and his teachings with the emphases to know, love, and follow him; 2) a focus on **scripture** and going directly to the Word of God for guidance; and 3) a focus on **community**, emphasizing corporate rather than individual decision-making (Wittlinger, p.25).

Our streams of influence began as children of the Radical Reformation (Anabaptism) in the 17th century and German Pietism in the 18th century. Our forefathers and mothers left Europe in the mid-1700s as a persecuted and marginalized people. Anabaptists held to a literal interpretation of the Bible, believer's baptism, voluntary church membership, a commitment to obedient discipleship centered on the teachings of Jesus, non-violence, and separation of church and state. Pietists emphasized the new birth experience of personal conversion as normative for the beginning of the Christian life.

A century later, the BIC were impacted by the teachings of John Wesley and the Wesleyan Holiness revival. Through this influence, the church embraced the deeper, fuller sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

By the 1950s, the BIC again sought renewal, this time in the American Evangelical movement. The BIC practice of non-conformity sometimes fell into legalism, and the Church struggled to retain its youth as well as win new people to Christ. The BIC became energized by the evangelistic fervor and commitment to prayer of the Evangelical churches around them. The basic tenets of Evangelicalism – the primacy of the Bible, personal conversion, the saving work of Jesus on the cross, and sharing the faith in word and deed – all resonated with a church in need of and desiring a fresh touch of God's Spirit.

Carried along by these streams of influence throughout its history, the BIC have always sought to pursue what God has called them to be and do. As many Brethren in Christ church historians have affirmed, the BIC have always been revivalists - open to new movements of the Spirit as a community of believers called to follow Jesus.

Positioned for the Future

For almost two-and-a-half centuries, we have sought to live simply and with integrity as a committed community of believers, putting the Bible first while keeping Jesus at the center of all we do and say.

Our highest priority continues to be following Jesus in our commitment to the Great Commandment (loving God and loving our neighbor – Matt. 22:34-40) and the Great Commission (making disciples of all nations – Matt. 28:18-20). We have always held the conviction that *doing* faith is just as important as *believing* faith, and that *piety* that does not lead to *obedience* is really no faith at all.

Jesus has called us to more than just the polarized, bifurcated world in which we live today – a world that divides 'conservatives' and 'liberals' like some modern-day sheep and goats. More than ever, we believe that as sisters and



brothers in Christ, we should join our Heavenly Father in the task of forming a prophetic, peaceable Kingdom that is not of this world - an alternative biblical community centered on Jesus that speaks of nothing but allegiance to him.

Today, as we prepare to celebrate our 250th anniversary in 2028, we continue to pursue what God has called us to be and do. The unprecedented disruptions caused by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic have forced all of us to rethink our paradigms of ministry. Going forward, every congregation and ministry will have expanded opportunities for digital engagement in evangelism, church planting, and discipleship. We are trusting God to give us wisdom and courage as we seek to employ new ways of communicating the Good News of Jesus Christ in the years ahead.

Having synthesized various streams of influence in the past and embracing the new challenges and opportunities God has for us going forward, here are some guiding priorities we see propelling BIC U.S. into the future:

1. Reaffirming Our Identity as a Community of Christ-Followers

First and foremost, as Brethren in Christ we are called to be a covenant community of Christ-followers who value wholehearted obedience to Christ Jesus through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

For us as BIC, our identity in Christ precedes every other aspect of who we are and what we are called to do as God's people today. We would ask, in what ways can we strengthen our identity as a covenant community of Christ followers who are living in wholehearted obedience to him?

We are committed to developing and implementing plans and strategies that will engage BIC U.S. congregations in learning, understanding, living, and teaching what it means to be communities of Christ-followers. This involves keeping Jesus at our center, going directly to the Word of God for guidance, and teaching our core values as guiding principles for life and practice.

Objective: Increase understanding and awareness of our core values

Goal: By 2028, 75% of all BIC U.S. assigned ministers will have participated in denominational education related to the core values

Strategy: Provide denominational teaching that highlights each core value and how they can be applied at home and around the world

Metrics: Track progress toward the goal

Objective: Update the *Focusing Our Faith* book and include core practices. Because the core values are used by BIC persons in other countries, the book should have more of a global perspective (or have two editions—one for U.S. audiences and one for those outside the U.S.)

Goal: Have an updated version of the book by General Assembly 2024

Strategy: Update the book

Metrics: Track progress toward the goal

Objective: Have BIC U.S. congregations use the core values and their supporting materials in congregational life such as preaching and teaching, website posting, youth and children's teaching, new attendee/member classes, etc.

Goal: By 2028, 75% of all BIC U.S. congregations will have incorporated the core values into their congregation's ministry and teaching

Strategy: Provide the materials outlined above and encourage their use

Metrics: Track progress toward the goal



2. Making Lifelong Disciples

As a community of Christ-followers, we are called to make disciples of all people. Therefore, we prioritize reaching others with the good news of Jesus and helping them to become his lifelong disciples.

We live in a post-Christian, post-churched world where the number of people who claim no religious affiliation is significantly on the rise. We would ask ourselves, in what ways are BIC U.S. congregations, each in their unique ministry contexts, prioritizing reaching others with the good news of Jesus and helping them to become his lifelong disciples? What are the core practices that will help a person who is far from Jesus engage in a lifetime of devotion to him?

We are committed to assisting congregations in developing and implementing strategies for both reaching others with the good news of Jesus (evangelism) and helping people become lifelong disciples of Christ (discipleship). We will help each congregation to evaluate the extent to which they have or have not prioritized helping people become lifelong followers of Jesus and aid them in assessing the strategies they are implementing in pursuit of this priority.

Objective: Increase understanding and awareness of the nature of discipleship from a BIC identity and perspective

Goal: By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. assigned ministers will have participated in denominational education related to lifelong discipleship

Strategy: Provide denominational teachings on lifelong discipleship

Metric: Track progress toward the goal

Objective: Increase understanding and awareness of disciple-making principles

Goal: By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. assigned ministers will have completed denominationally-provided or -sponsored education on disciple-making

Strategy: Provide resources, encouragement, and accountability to assigned ministers on disciple-making principles

Metric: Track progress toward the goal

Objective: Have BIC U.S. congregations develop a contextually-specific process “roadmap” for developing lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ

Goal: By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. congregations will have developed and implemented their roadmap

Strategy: Provide resources, encouragement, and accountability to congregations as they develop their roadmap

Metric: Track progress toward the goal

3. Multiplying Missional Congregations, Movements, and Leaders

As we seek to be a community of Christ-followers who are making lifelong disciples, central to our mission is (a) helping congregations to thrive by being healthy and reproducing; (b) training, equipping, and empowering individuals to be servant leaders; and (c) cultivating and multiplying sites of missional vitality that draw people into a lifelong relationship of knowing, loving, and following Jesus.

What are the critical factors that enable local congregations to thrive in their contexts within a global world? How can we best equip and empower vibrant servant leaders who will positively contribute to the pursuit of our missional priorities?

We are committed to developing and implementing initiatives to help existing congregations of all sizes to be healthy, thriving, and reproducing. As well, we will foster initiatives that call and equip a diverse cadre of leaders to be increasingly healthy and fruitful. All of this is designed to encourage the development of new, creative, and contextually-relevant models of being the church in today’s quickly changing world.



Objective: Have BIC U.S. congregations better understand the nature of healthy and reproducing congregations
Goal: By 2028, 75% of congregations will have developed a congregational guide and plan to be a healthy and reproducing congregation. This plan will include a context/community assessment and a congregational health assessment
Strategy: BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
Metric: Track progress toward the goal

Objective: Training assigned ministers in servant-leadership in the BIC and equipping them to teach others
Goal: By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. assigned ministers will have completed training on the nature of servant-leadership
Strategy: BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
Metric: Track the number of assigned ministers who complete the training

Objective: Multiply sites of missional vitality that draw people into a lifelong relationship of knowing, loving, and following Jesus
Goal: By 2028, increase the number of BIC U.S. congregations by 25 and help all congregations progress toward missional vitality
Strategy: BIC U.S. will develop and implement a denominational church-planting strategy
Metric: Track progress toward the goal

4. Increasing Global Awareness and Impact

We desire that every BIC U.S. congregation will increase in global and cross-cultural awareness, understanding, and impact, and that BIC U.S. World Missions will be the primary ministry through which BIC U.S. congregations and individuals engage in this work.

We would ask, are each of our local congregations doing their part to engage the command of Jesus to make disciples of all nations? Is each congregation committed to cross-cultural church planting? Do we demonstrate a whole-hearted belief that people of different ethnicities and cultures are equal in their ability to bring glory to God?

We invite every BIC U.S. congregation to work with BIC U.S. World Missions, engaging in reciprocal cross-cultural relationships in their local, regional, and global communities. As Teresa of Avila once famously said, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassionately on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.”

Objective: Have BIC U.S. assigned ministers and congregations become more aware of the need for and challenges of cross-cultural ministry
Goal: By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. assigned ministers will have completed an educational unit on cross-cultural ministry
Strategy: BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
Metric: Track progress toward the goal

Objective: Have BIC U.S. assigned ministers better understand the global reality of the BIC Church
Goal: By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. assigned ministers will have completed an educational unit on the global BIC
Strategy: BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
Metric: Track progress toward the goal



- Objective:** Have BIC U.S. congregations better understand and connect with BIC U.S. missionaries
- Goal:** By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. congregations will host (in person or digitally) a BIC U.S. global worker or staff person on at least one occasion and will have a plan for ongoing relationship with and/or support of a global worker
- Strategy:** BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
- Metric:** Track progress toward the goal

5. Growing to Reflect the Demographic Realities of Our Communities

We acknowledge that our communities are diverse. We desire that our congregations will increasingly reflect the make-up of the contexts in which they minister and that our denominational leadership will grow to reflect the wide variety of gifted and qualified persons (men, women, ethnicities) that comprise our congregations.

We would ask, what are the best ways for congregations to reach underrepresented-people and groups in their communities? In the same way, how can BIC U.S. facilitate more diverse representation in all of its leadership structures?

We are committed to developing and utilizing all available tools to assist congregations in better understanding their social and cultural contexts and implement all appropriate ministry strategies. Simultaneously, we will work to assess current levels of diversity in all BIC U.S. leadership structures and strive to employ strategies for significant improvement in the diversity of denominational leadership teams.

- Objective:** Have BIC U.S. congregations better understand the demographic realities of their congregation and community
- Goal:** By 2028, 75% of BIC U.S. congregations will have completed a survey/study that will help them understand the demographic realities of their congregation and community
- Strategy:** BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
- Metric:** Track progress toward the goal
- Objective:** To increase the number of appropriately qualified women and people of color serving in BIC U.S. assigned ministry roles
- Goal:** By 2028, to see an increase of 25% in both women and people of color serving in BIC U.S. assigned ministry roles
- Strategy:** BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
- Metric:** Track progress toward the goal
- Objective:** To increase the number of appropriately-qualified women and people of color serving on BIC U.S. Regional Conference and General Conference governing boards
- Goal:** By 2028, to see an increase of 25% in both women and people of color serving in BIC U.S. Regional Conference and General Conference governing boards
- Strategy:** BIC U.S. will provide the resources, encouragement, and accountability necessary
- Metric:** Track progress toward the goal
- Objective:** To increase the number of appropriately-qualified women and people of color serving/advising on the BIC U.S. Leadership Council
- Goal:** By 2028, to see broader and more diverse (culture, gender, ethnicity, experience) input into leadership decisions and church life
- Strategy:** Develop a Leadership Council Advisory Team (LCAT)
- Metric:** Track progress toward the goal



Conclusion

When a handful of devout young Brethren decided to baptize one another in the Conoy Creek in Central Pennsylvania in or around 1778, they set in motion a movement that they never could have imagined would be in existence almost two-and-a-half centuries later. Today we, the Brethren in Christ U.S., continue to re-envision what it means for us to be unapologetic followers of Jesus in today's quickly-changing world. Rooted in the rich soil of our past, we are positioned to push forward with hope and anticipation into the glorious future that God has for us in the days and years to come.