

IN PART

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST COMMUNITY IN THE U.S.

Summer 2014



IN YOUR WORDS

Thank you for the wonderful issue on nonconformity. Devin Manzullo-Thomas' article placed the issue in the context of our heritage, Patrick Cicero suggested several creative ideas for relating nonconformity to the issues of our present context, and Heather Beaty's testimony brought nonconformity to life. It is refreshing to receive an alternative to the "relevance to culture" message that we hear most of the time. We need to remember that the Gospel must be related to the cultural context but is always countercultural. Our forefathers and foremothers have set a good example for us.

I recently attended a regional conference where our traditional plain dress was called "trappings" three times. Moreover, the message was that we are now better able to reach our contemporary culture because we have abandoned those "trappings." My mother said that her covering and plain dress opened many doors to witness as a hospital charge nurse. Indeed, my home congregation of plainly dressed people was truly "missional," reaching quite a few persons with no Christian background, including my father.

We do not need to devalue previous ways of relating to culture to support our own. At present, we concentrate on relating the Gospel to our culture but do not attend so much to allowing the Gospel to critically speak to our culture. Indeed, I think that we have something to learn from our forebears in presenting a Gospel that is both relevant and countercultural.

—John R. Yeatts (Grantham, Pa.)

THE VIEW FROM HERE

My husband and I are dreamers. In the 11 years we've been married, we've had countless conversations beginning with, "Wouldn't it be cool if . . .?" Together, we've dreamt up intentional Christian communities, unconventional businesses, self-sustaining farms, and even, once, a whole town. One of the common threads running through our dreams for the future is *true community*—sharing life on a meaningful level with others around us. This daily, intimate connection with a group of Jesus-followers is something we crave even though we grew up in the Church, surrounded by loving families.

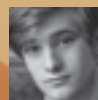
I used to think that we'd have to buy up a city block or 50 acres in the country and create an earnest intentional community with other like-minded families and individuals. I won't lie; I still dream of doing this. But more and more I hear Jesus asking me to follow Him more faithfully in the church He's already built—to be vulnerable, honest, and gracious with the motley crew of believers that surround me. And when I dare to do that, church feels a lot more *real*.

As Brethren in Christ, we believe that God is calling us to "integrity in relationships and mutual accountability in an atmosphere of grace, love, and acceptance." But as the stories in this issue of *In Part* illustrate, this kind of atmosphere is not something we pursue for its own sake. It's a natural result of following Jesus. How comforting it is for me to be reminded that God is at work in our faith community; our job is to show up with willing hands and humble hearts.

Dulcimer

Dulcimer Hope Brubaker,
guest editor

Creative contributors



Bo Williams, a studio art major at Messiah College (Mechanicsburg, Pa.), aspires to be an independent photographer, working in both digital and film mediums. His pieces appear on the cover and pages 4–7.



Chris Maghintay graduated from Messiah College in 2011. Since then he's worked as a graphic artist in the toy, video game, and pet industries. He also designs pop culture shirts and makes video game-inspired music. CHRISMAG.COM.

IN PART™

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COMMUNITY IN THE U.S.

*Now I know **in part**; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. I Corinthians 13:12*

**BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH
IN THE U.S.**

National Director: Alan Robinson

Guest Editor: Dulcimer Hope Brubaker

Creative Consultant: Nathan Stonge

Graphic Designer: William Teodori

Art Director: David Kasperek

431 Grantham Road
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055 USA
Telephone: (717) 697-2634
Fax: (717) 697-7714

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→ *True community*

BY **PERRY ENGLE**

IN MOTION

Ever wondered . . .
what's community?

com•mu•ni•ty
| kə'mju-nəti |

NOUN:

a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society

USED IN A SENTENCE:

The Brethren in Christ are a community of faith—a group of believers committed to helping one another follow Jesus as we love and serve one another and those around us.



Bare feet and humble hearts

Footwashing has been a staple of Brethren in Christ love feasts and other special services, often accompanied by communion and a time of confession. While this symbolic practice may seem strange in our culture of clean feet, footwashing remains a vital part of community life for many congregations, calling participants to humility and reconciliation with God and one another. In this 1981 photo, men from the Grantham (Pa.) congregation wash one another's feet just as Jesus washed the feet of His disciples at Passover.

The United States of ISOLA-TION

It's a widely publicized fact that nearly three-quarters of the United States calls itself "Christian."* But more and more, Americans are opting out of the communal aspect of faith, missing out on a vital component of what it means to follow Jesus.

40
%

Forty percent of Americans gave the same reason for why they don't go to church. Simply put, "I find God somewhere else." (Barna Group, 2014)

21
%

Only one out of every five self-identified Christians (21%) believes that spiritual maturity requires a vital connection to a community of faith. (Barna Group, 2011)

35
%

Further, only one-third (35%) claims to have confessed their sins verbally to another believer at some point during the past quarter. (Barna Group, 2011)

20
%

Eleven years ago, slightly over one out of 10 Americans self-identified as lonely. By 2013, that number had doubled—a paradoxical reality in the full swing of the social media age. (Barna Group, 2013)



*Pew Research Center, 2012

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TO OUR CORE

EXPLORING THE CENTRAL VALUES OF THE BIC CHURCH

THE BEAUTY IN THE MESS

Following Jesus and finding community

by SARAH WHITE

I was born in Santa Barbara, California—gorgeous, clean, sunny Santa Barbara. Eight years ago, I bought a home in Kensington, a notoriously poor and drug-ridden section of Philadelphia, Pa. For the first few years I lived here, trash would rain into my backyard from neighboring rooftops (cereal boxes, half-eaten chicken wings, used diapers, you name it). I've been asked countless times why anyone would leave Santa Barbara for Philadelphia. The answer, paradoxically, is that Jesus invited me into something richer.

I was first exposed to the concept that Jesus can be seen in the face of the poor when I was 16. Four years later, in college, I started attending Circle of Hope and found a common mission for peace and social justice, living simply, living in community, and caring about the poor. A year or so later, a number of us bought houses in Kensington to plant another congregation and build a communal life together.

We transformed an abandoned dental office into a place of worship. We cleaned out thousands of old dental records and swept up rat and pigeon skeletons. Our first public meeting was in January, and we didn't have any heat, so we bundled up around a couple of space heaters and worshipped God.

At first, it was very challenging to live on our block. Our neighbors seemed, and most likely were, suspicious of us. It was hard for me to sleep at night. There were so many noises

→ **BELONGING TO THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH:** We value integrity in relationships and mutual accountability in an atmosphere of grace, love, and acceptance.



Photo by Jamie Glisson

that were unfamiliar, the most bothersome of which was the sound of neighbors fighting. One night we watched from our third floor window as a group of teenagers broke into and hot-wired our housemate's car; we were too afraid to go outside and ask them to stop. And then there was the time—rather, *two* times—our neighbor's house was set on fire by an angry tenant. I remember standing outside our house as our neighbors poured out onto the street, seven fire trucks came to the scene, and black smoke spilled out the front windows of our neighbor's home. I was scared. But I was not alone.

We, our community of faith, were together in this. There are at least 50 Circle of Hope members within six blocks of where I live. Neighborhood disasters, small and large, are significantly more bearable in this context.

We belong. We face the realities and brokenness of our neighborhood and ourselves with openness and grace. We are neighbors and friends. We watch each other's kids, bring new parents meals, participate in block clean-ups, mourn losses, express frustrations, encourage face-to-face dialogue around conflict, and gather to watch ridiculous television shows.

Part of belonging to a community, for me, is accepting its messiness along with its beauty. Accepting that I will be disappointed by people, and that I will disappoint others. But I'm in it for the long haul. And I anticipate, confidently, that Jesus will continue to meet us here.



Sarah White is a doctor of clinical psychology, wife of a tattoo artist, mother to a 4-year-old and second child on the way, and a covenant member of Circle of Hope Frankford and Norris (Philadelphia, Pa.).

THE MOSAIC OF US

Where God artfully fits together
our past, present, and future as
Brethren in Christ

by Alan Robinson

with Dulcimer Hope
Brubaker

Several years ago

the Brethren in Christ in North America adopted a vision statement that declared, “God is calling the BIC Church in North America by 2020 to be an expanding mosaic of churches, all seeing lives transformed by Jesus Christ.” A mosaic? Intrigued, I embarked on some research.

Now, it’s a universally accepted fact that everything you read on the Internet is correct. So when I wanted to get a quick and accurate definition of the word *mosaic* I simply Googled “What is a mosaic?” and Wikipedia informed me that “Mosaic is the art of creating images with an assemblage of small pieces of colored glass, stone, or other materials.”

I love the analogy of our church family being an image comprised of many small pieces. Our denominational vision identifies the pieces of material in the mosaic as “churches,” but these congregations are themselves mosaics consisting of people. Our denominational vision is, therefore, to be a mosaic of other mosaics. And these mosaics are made up of many different people. Real people. People with unique lives and stories and journeys and backgrounds.

However, the Brethren in Christ vision is not merely to be a mosaic but, rather, an *expanding* mosaic of churches, always changing. New additions will contrast with the current pieces. And the current components already have significantly different colors and textures from those that comprised the work in previous years and decades. It’s constantly being transformed.

How to make a mosaic

The analogy of a growing and changing mosaic is rooted in the commission of Jesus to His disciples to “make disciples of all nations.” Being open to the new things God is doing in the world can be very exhilarating and God-honoring work. But it does not come without risk. After all, an expanding and changing mosaic could take on any number of different styles. It’s just like adding new people to your family through marriage, birth, or adoption: New people change the family portrait. This change can be incredibly wonderful and beautiful. On the other hand, the potential exists for the important aspects of our identity to get diluted or even lost completely, such that we can no longer see the family resemblance.

One of the prevalent fears I have heard during my first year in this new denominational role is that the Brethren in Christ are losing the parts of our family identity that we do not want to lose. Some people have even suggested that the family resemblance—our distinctive theological identity—has already faded amid the growth and change of an expanding mosaic. To put it in other words, if we took a denominational “selfie,” some say the resulting picture would bear no likeness to the family portraits of the past.

The closest I have ever come to making a mosaic is assembling a jigsaw puzzle. I have never been a jigsaw puzzle aficionado, but I have fond memories of competing against my younger daughter (who was 5 or 6 at the time) to see how fast we could complete one of her puzzles. Naturally, I retired from this important competition as the reigning champion. Like all puzzle whizzes, I knew that the process goes much easier and more quickly if you can locate and correctly position the four corner pieces. They are easy to find because, unlike the other pieces, they have two straight sides that come together in a 90-degree angle. Together, these four corner pieces begin to form the framework within which all the other pieces fit. They distinguish what is inside the puzzle from the loose pieces that are scattered around outside.

Start with the center

Our church is not as tidy or straightforward as a jigsaw puzzle. We don’t have a

**JUST
LIKE US, the
Early Church had
the daunting task
of maintaining unity
as various cultures
CLASHED and
COLLIDED
within.**

vibrant color image on the top of the box to tell us what the final image should look like. Our various elements were not custom-cut in a factory for a perfect, snug fit. And we don't have four easily distinguished corner pieces to frame and contain us. What we do have at the very center of our expanding and changing mosaic is Christ—His life, ministry, and example as expressed in the New Testament. With Christ at our center, we also have the richness and distinctive textures of four different theological movements that have influenced us and made us who we are as Brethren in Christ—Anabaptism, Pietism, Wesleyanism, and Evangelicalism. Radiating out from the center, each of these perspectives brings its own style and palette to the mosaic, informing and flowing into each new piece we add.

The first foundational piece is Anabaptism. The radical reformers

or Anabaptists of the 16th century called followers of Jesus to pledge their allegiance to Christ and His kingdom through believer's baptism. Those who were thus baptized voluntarily separated themselves from the world by living a life of non-conformity, especially in relation to coercion and violence. From Anabaptism, we gain our distinctive understandings of peace, nonconformity, mutual accountability, and the pursuit of a simple lifestyle.

In counterbalance to Anabaptism, the 18th-century movement of Pietism focused on the heart of the person and his or her personal experience of God. This emphasis on a personal experience in the heart led us Brethren in Christ to an emphasis on love—God's love for us and our love for God—an emotion that was to be felt and experienced in relationship. Out of the convergence of Anabaptism and Pietism, the BIC were born, and after these center pieces were in place, everything else followed.

Next, the Brethren in Christ were influenced by the Wesleyan emphasis on holiness. This perspective has strongly informed our theology of salvation so that we do not see salvation as merely justification or forgiveness; but we believe in a process that entirely transforms the whole person so that he or she is more and more conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus.

The most recent addition to the center of our mosaic is Evangelicalism. It is a complex movement that includes an emphasis on sharing the Good News, receiving the saving grace of God that comes through faith alone, and acknowledging the inspiration of Scripture—values that provide balance and harmony to the other three theologies. However, Evangelicalism can also bring with it beliefs and traditions that may clash with the other pieces of our Brethren in Christ mosaic. So we must carefully heed the advice of Luke Keefer, Jr., to be “evangelicals with a difference.”

Move with the Spirit

Even with these foundational pieces in place, I know some of us are looking at our church “selfie” and wondering where the family resemblance is. To answer that question, I revisit the expanding mosaic of the Early Church. Over a relatively short period of time this group of believers, consisting of many women and men who actually walked with Jesus, underwent such dramatic changes that it probably wouldn't have recognized itself, either—except for the undeniable resemblance it bore to Jesus.

Consider some examples from Acts. The first—and probably most painful—adjustment these believers had to face was the physical absence of Jesus. Promising His Spirit and commissioning them as witnesses, Jesus is taken up into the clouds. In response, the disciples begin a continuous process of seeking God to organize themselves, figure out what it means to be witnesses, and determine how to faithfully follow a Lord and teacher who is no longer physically present (Acts 1:7–26).

Just 10 days later, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit really shakes things up:

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:1–4).

After the Spirit came, the Church couldn't stay local anymore; it was time to hit the road. Just as Jesus had promised, they now had the ability and responsibility to spread the Good News of the grace they'd received. This reminds me of the momentous change we Brethren in Christ experienced when believers were inspired to share our faith through overseas mission work. We were no longer homogenous, contained within a few regions of the U.S. and Canada; we became a global community, embracing many cultures.

And just like us, the Early Church had the daunting task of maintaining unity as various cultures clashed and collided within. Acts 6 tells of a disagreement—and the subsequent response—regarding how the Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews cared for the poor among them. And in Acts 15,

Peter calls the Church to a brave new faith that relies less on laws and more on grace.

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. . . . We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:7–11).

This change must have been unbearable for some believers with strong convictions about Jewish customs. Without the sign of circumcision, how could they communicate that they were set apart, a holy people devoted to God? And some Brethren in Christ brothers and sisters have undoubtedly wrestled with similar questions as we gradually exchanged plain dress for jeans and t-shirts; German for English; and a cappella worship for organs and

choirs, eventually giving way to modern worship bands.

But, like the Early Church, many of us changed because what mattered most to us was following Jesus. Even though He's not physically present with us, Jesus is still speaking to us, leading us, guiding us. And we are His physical representation on Earth, responding to the world around us in a way that honors and obeys Him. This means that our mosaic is going to be changing and expanding all the time as new people join us and as God breathes life into new modes of ministry.

As for what our mosaic will look like—what picture will we make when all the pieces come together? I don't know. Maybe we won't know until we get to Heaven. But I hope it looks a lot like Jesus.



Alan Robinson is the national director of the BIC Church in the U.S. He lives with his wife, Sharon, in Carlisle, Pa.

Multiplificación

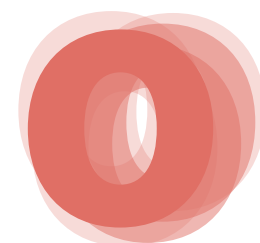
When **believers** from South Florida crossed borders to share their faith, God didn't just add to their number. He **multiplied**.

by Chelsea Dawn

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8 IN PART

"Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God. . . . Such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth." —John Wesley



One night, Mercedes Velez heard the nearly audible voice of God. "Tasajera." But what did it mean? It sounded like a name—perhaps the name of a place? Velez had to find out. After some searching, she had her answer.

Though too small to locate on a map, she discovered that Tasajera was a town in her home country of the Dominican Republic. Feeling the clear call of God, she left her home church, Bethel BIC (Miami, Fla.)—where she had come to know the Lord—and moved to tiny Tasajera. There, Velez began to share her faith in her own language, with her own people, and planted the first BIC church in the Dominican Republic. Today, as a result of her faithful service, there are 10 churches in the northern region with more than 580 members among them.

In this bold act of leaving the comfort of the U.S., Velez is not alone. She is just one of dozens of individuals from churches in South Florida who have been called back to their native countries to share their faith. And the resulting church plants are rapidly lighting up all across the map of Latin America.

Preparing to launch

The multiplication began in 1985 when former bishop of the Southeast Conference Eduardo Llanes planted Bethel BIC, the first Spanish-speaking *Hermanos en Cristo* (Brethren in Christ) church in Miami. Having come to know Christ as a young man in Cuba, Llanes is known for his fervent passion for missions, particularly among Hispanic and Latino communities. Out of Bethel's ministry, 58 more Spanish-speaking churches have been established in the greater Miami area alone and more than 60 churches have been planted in Central and South America.

Despite the dynamic increase of his ministry, Llanes reflects that "[Over time] I realized that effective ministry can take place only as we are empowered by the Spirit's presence.

These years in ministry have taught me that He is the One who transforms lives and [I should] not overestimate my part in the whole process."¹

Aner Morejón, current bishop of the Southeast Conference, agrees. "The multiplication came in a spontaneous way; it's not as if we made some great plan," he explains. "It was individual pastors and churches starting their own missions. Then we would say, 'tell us what you have so that we can support and help to unite you.'"

Departing from Miami

It's hardly surprising that South Florida has become such a gateway to Latin America. As of 2011, nearly 32 percent of metro Miami's growth was foreign-born, more than half of whom had become U.S. citizens. This diversity, and the mobility afforded by dual citizenship, has made South Florida a buzzing launch pad for immigrant and first-generation missionaries returning voluntarily to serve in Latin America.

"The experience for them is much like going home," observes former executive director of BIC World Missions Chris Sharp. "I believe they have a passion to reach back to their homelands, to take the Gospel as evangelists and church planters." These native pastors and church planters, already fluent in the local language and culture, have a sturdy foundation of mutual understanding on which to build a framework of BIC values.

"The 10 Core Values seem to resonate with them," notes Don McNiven, executive director of the International Brethren in Christ Association (IBICA), "especially

"One pastor decided to be part of the family, so he brought with him **30 more adopted churches!**" says Carrillo.

summer 2014 9

pursuing peace and living simply.” These interpretations of Jesus’ message may create a refreshing contrast among a predominantly Roman Catholic and Pentecostal population. And the BIC emphasis on putting one’s faith into practice comes naturally to the expressive and passionate cultures of Latin America.

Searching for a family

Not only are pastors and missionaries from South Florida initiating ministries in Latin America, but some pastors of existing independent and nondenominational churches are also seeking out BIC ministerial leadership of their own accord.

Take Ciudad De Dios, for example. Literally translated as “City of God,” this 1,000-member congregation in San José, Costa Rica, began three decades ago as a small group of charismatic Catholics who met to worship in homes. But in the early 2000s, pastor Alex Alvarado began praying for a ministerial covering and in 2008 met with Llanes and Morejón to learn more about the Brethren in Christ. Deeply impressed, Alvarado and his congregation enthusiastically embraced their new denomination, becoming the first of 10 BIC churches in Costa Rica.

The BIC presence in Cuba dates back much further, to 1954, during the Cuban Revolution. Former bishop Llanes, a young pastor at the time, took up where BIC missionaries left off when they were required to return to North America. He faithfully disciplined churches throughout the “Silent Period” when all contact with North America was cut off. The original network of congregations has continued to increase, reports Constain Carrillo, BIC regional coordinator for the Caribbean. And sometimes growth is explosive. “One pastor decided to be part of the family, so he brought with him 30 more adopted churches!” says Carrillo.

Connecting the dots

Once churches have been planted or adopted, there is also the task of integrating and uniting them in cohesive networks. Although Cuba and Nicaragua, for example, already have established conferences, there are congrega-

“We want to organize, but we don’t want to lose the work of God,” says Morejón.

“We want to watch what is happening and follow.”

tions that still don’t know about the conferences in their own country. And connecting them is no small feat. “In some countries,” Sharp says, “there were three different groups of BIC churches that were unrelated.” Along with Carrillo for the Caribbean, two other regional coordinators were appointed in April 2013 in an effort to bring together BIC church plants: Alex Alvarado for Central America and Maria Perdomo for South America.

Slowly, but surely, these congregations are beginning to rub shoulders, share stories, and form lasting bonds. In December, the BIC congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean met for the first time in history. Held in Costa Rica, this summit focused on two main objectives, explains Morejón: “To intentionally form BIC identity and to build community and connection between pastors and regions.” During the conference, leaders and pastors from all over Latin America joined together in fellowship and training in preparation for developing self-sustaining networks in their own regions.

“This was a very successful event,” affirms Sharp. “It was a catalyst for the churches to begin working together, supporting each other, and relating to each other for training, insight, and resourcing.” She left Costa Rica confident that

the leaders there “captured the vision of the broader BIC Church throughout the Latin American region.”

Exploring new territory

There are still many areas of Central and South America to be reached, as well as in the Caribbean. But even though growth may be invisible as of yet, new seeds have germinated and are pushing their way up through the soil.

In Guatemala, a pastor is in the process of joining the BIC. Another believer from Miami recently sold her home to move to Nicaragua and open a new church. And a local government in Puerto Rico has recently granted Miami pastor Lazaro Pérez the land he needs to make his vision a reality—planting a BIC church and opening a home for recovering drug addicts.

Cuban pastor David Monduy has braved an unfavorable political climate to serve faithfully among eight tribes in the jungles of Ecuador. Although the government prohibits the planting of churches by anyone other than a national Ecuadorian, Monduy’s ministry, ConPasión Internacional (WithPassion International), has plans to begin work with seven more tribes that have never heard the Gospel.

Undaunted by political, economic, and other challenges, pastors and lay leaders alike are hearing God’s call and obeying. They are daringly uprooting themselves and planting new congregations, but they are quick to stress that none of this explosive growth is a result of their own strength or efforts.

“We want to organize, but we don’t want to lose the work of God,” says Morejón. “We want to watch what is happening and follow.” And as we do that, we continue to receive the blessing of fruitful multiplication throughout Latin America—unity with our *hermanos en Cristo*.



Chelsea Dawn lives in Guadalajara, Mexico, where she co-founded and directs *Dancer’s Voice* magazine with her husband, Jorge Fraire. She also works as a dance educator and performer, and is a 2006 graduate of Messiah College.

Mapping the growth

These are just a few of the countless multiplication miracles rippling through Central and South America and the Caribbean. The Global Latin BIC Church Summary recognizes at least 294 organized BIC congregations in the following countries as of December 31, 2013:



TO THE POINT

We have this hope

Local leaders from all over the country weigh in on their hopes and excitement about where God is leading us as a body of believers.

Our children are inheriting a world where the Christian story is increasingly heard incoherently, and where the Church is becoming marginalized in a postmodern and post-Christendom environment. That's not necessarily a bad thing. At the margins of this strange new world, the Brethren in Christ Church aspires to be a home for Jesus-followers, giving us a Jesus-centered sense of holy identity and a Jesus-shaped mission of welcoming reconciliation. We are discovering a fresh capacity to welcome those who share neither our particular ethnic heritage, nor our specific theological proclivities, in the journey of belief in our ever-present savior, teacher, friend, and Lord—Jesus Christ.

Jeff Wright, Madison Street Church (Riverside, Calif.)

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (*Ephesians 4:4–6*).

I am encouraged to see the BIC Church in the U.S. embrace and seek wise counsel and fresh insight from Brethren in Christ people in other countries. I believe this will enhance our understanding of God and the way he works in our hearts and in the world. Being part of the global Church is very important to what it means to be Brethren in Christ.

Ray Kipe, Five Forks BIC (Waynesboro, Pa.)

I'm encouraged by our emphasis this year in the Midwest Conference of 'rediscipling' with a strong concern for children. Many of the children of my grandchildren's ages are already strongly committed to Jesus, and their enthusiasm for General Conference helps me believe that if we keep on making this a priority the dividends will be wonderful.

Margaret Engle, Abilene (Kans.) BIC

When I think of my kids' future, I believe they may have difficult choices to make regarding nationalism and peace. I am encouraged that the Brethren in Christ have kept the light shining on this aspect of our Christian walk and maintained our beliefs about Jesus in the midst of so much skepticism over the Scripture and Christ's authority. If Jesus does not have the authority of divinity, how can my children find the strength to maintain love and peace in a vicious, divided world? So this commitment of ours to follow and obey the master, our creator and friend, gives me great hope for the future.

Craig Sipes, Morrison (Ill.) BIC

I am very encouraged that we are becoming a family of more nations, tribes, and tongues. Isaiah's vision and John's revelation are the reality for Christ's Church, and it's a joy to see our denomination love and work to make this a reality on earth as it is in heaven. Now we just need to continue making disciples and being lights to our world.

Hank Johnson, Harrisburg (Pa.) BIC

PARTING WORDS

TRUE COMMUNITY

Peeling back the labels to reveal the stories of our neighbors

by PERRY ENGLE

"Hey, I know you!!"

We arrived simultaneously at the self-checkout lane at the local grocery store, and I had clearly startled her as she turned to stare at me through coke-bottle glasses. A good foot shorter than me, she had sun-weathered skin, sandpaper hands, and a stained t-shirt.

"I mean, I *know* you. I know what you *do*. You're that lady that holds the sign for the tax-preparation service out on Mountain Avenue."

She stared even harder. She looked like she wanted to run away.

My family tells me people sometimes feel threatened by my loud, outgoing personality, and the way I invade their space. I like to think of myself as sincere and enthusiastic, but I guess my extroversion could at points be, well . . . obnoxious.

I introduced myself, and said, "I want you to know that I think you're really *good* at what you do. You really give it your all."

She blinked, told me her name, and then said somewhat abruptly, "You know, I haven't always done this kind of work."

"This kind of work" is standing on street corners with hand-held signs directing people to local businesses. And this lady doesn't just hold her sign. She dances with it, twirls it, and *gets down* with it. In her own inimitable hyper-animated way, she never fails to draw attention to her sign.

Just then, giant red-hot tears started exploding in huge splash marks on her

dirty shirt. She explained that for years she had been a teacher's aide at a local community college. She had been laid off during the recession and the only kind of work she could find was dancing with a sign, dressed up like the Statue of Liberty, while standing out in the California sun for eight dollars an hour.

I went weak in the knees when I realized I didn't know this lady *at all*.

More than that, I realized I had been complicit in demeaning this woman from the comfort of my car. While driving around town, I would make a point to tell my daughters to "make sure you get your college education so you don't end up *holding a sign like that lady*."

Henri Nouwen once wrote, "Every human face is the face of a neighbor." But so often I casually dehumanize people in order to give myself permission to ignore them. I label people so that I can stereotype them and then dismiss them.

It's easy to do—to objectify people by where they live or how they look or what they do. We stereotype, reject, and ignore people because *we don't know them*. And honestly, we don't *want* to know them.

If true community means anything, it means being willing to involve myself with people who are *not like me*. Writes Nouwen: "No one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without the risk



of becoming hurt, wounded, or even destroyed in the process. Who can take away suffering without entering it?"

True community is the recognition that every human face is the face of a neighbor. It's making the effort to see each person as having a face, a name, and a story—a story of disappointment and brokenness, of possibility and hope.

It's admitting that we may not know someone, and having the humility to step out of our comfort zones to give it a try.



Perry Engle makes a habit of shamelessly embarrassing himself and his family in very public places. He is bishop of the Midwest and Pacific Regional Conferences of BIC U.S., and lives with his wife, Marta, and their family in Ontario, Calif.

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