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Reaffirming Our Brethren in Christ Identity

THIS IS THE second edition of *Shalom!* to highlight one of the five goals of Project 250, the Brethren in Christ U.S. vision plan in anticipation of the 250th anniversary in 2028 of the founding of the denomination. Last year we focused on Goal #5, and now we're backtracking to Goal #1: "Reaffirming our identity as a community of Christ-followers."

In an article in the December 2022 edition of *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, pastor Zach Spidel notes: "Today one can attend Brethren in Christ churches constructed in the style of traditional mainline Protestant sanctuaries, churches constructed like stadiums in the style of modern megachurches, churches which foreground a formal liturgy and those that are decidedly informal. Some will strongly affirm the peace position; others will never speak of it and have even placed American flags in their sanctuaries or embraced patriotic displays and messages. . . . There is not now one consistent ethos that is identifiably Brethren in Christ" (352-353).

Lisa Weaver Swartz, in another article in the August 2022 edition of the same journal, offers several recommendations for strengthening our identity. Among them are to tighten the language of the core values and address a deficit in collective memory (i.e., tell our stories) (294-296).

With those concerns about identity in mind, it is fitting that the first goal of Project 250 is to "reaffirm our identity as a community of Christ-followers." In my Learning Community (Sunday school class) this fall,

we've been studying the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. That passage was central to the early Anabaptists forebears who committed to living according to the teachings of Jesus—to be Christ-followers.

More than twenty years ago, a group of Brethren in Christ met to identify the core values that have guided us since those early days. Out of that meeting came ten core values. Over the years, I've heard critiques that the values are too generic (i.e., they're like "motherhood and apple pie"—who can disagree?). I've also heard stories of how pastors and congregants were attracted to the Brethren in Christ specifically because of the core values and how they distinguish our denomination especially from other evangelical churches.

Recognizing how complex and perplexing the question of denominational identity can be, this edition revisits how the core values were developed and how they work themselves out, and looks forward to a new book-length treatment and other resources. One article offers stories that "every Brethren in Christ should know"—stories about four individuals who followed Christ in the past. Another article, a review of a chapter in a book about congregational identity, provides a number of helpful questions to ask ourselves about our own congregations, ending with "How are we being Brethren in Christ?" Good question as we look forward to the next 250 years of being a community of Christ-followers.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

THIS ISSUE OF SHALOM!

<i>Identifying Our Core Values</i>	2
<i>Revisiting Our Core Values</i>	3
<i>The Brethren in Christ Mosaic</i>	5
<i>Stories Every Brethren in Christ Person Should Know</i>	6
<i>The Identity of the Brethren in Christ</i>	7
<i>Place, People, and Values</i>	9
<i>Choosing What I Did Not Choose</i>	10
BOOK REVIEW	
<i>Congregational Identity</i>	12

Identifying Our Core Values

By Warren Hoffman

THE BRETHREN IN Christ have a strong sense of purpose: to build a community of believers who worship and obey God and share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all people. To effectively reach non-Christians at the outset of a new century, however, the Brethren in Christ needed a clear statement of identity.

I discovered this for myself as a church planter in the 1980s. With my wife, Connie, and four daughters, our assignment was to start a Brethren in Christ church in Oklahoma City. For this, we were given a list of twenty-five households with some prior connection with the two existing Brethren in Christ churches in Oklahoma.

One by one, I contacted these house-

holds to invite their participation. My primary appeal was the need for a Brethren in Christ church in Oklahoma City. With the identity terminology at my disposal, I said: “No other church has such a biblical and balanced blend of Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan convictions.” At this point, their faces went blank. While they may have had some exposure to the broad sweep of church history, they had no knowledge of the collateral movements that shaped us. Before I could describe the denomination to anyone unfamiliar with these renewal movements, I had to give a tutorial on church history, an awkward detour that effectively diluted the impact of my persuasion.

To cope with this limitation, I took a different tack. I compared the Brethren in Christ to churches common in Oklahoma. I said: “We encourage people to be born again like the Baptists, but . . .” and I would explain the differences. I pressed on: “We share some things with the Nazarenes, but . . .” and I would explain. I concluded: “We’re similar to the Mennonites, but . . .” With each comparison, the conjunction “but” was my segue to the distinctive convictions of the Brethren in Christ. In this cumbersome way, I was able to sidestep church history. To my dismay, I often got tangled up in whatever “baggage” people had in relation to these churches, a serious flaw in this comparative approach.

The strongest critique of both approaches came directly from the Holy Spirit. One evening I visited with a young couple, not strongly churched. I may have been at my persuasive best as I described the Brethren in Christ but nothing got through. For all they understood, I may as well have been speaking Mandarin Chinese. Thoroughly disheartened, I left their apartment and sagged against my car. At that moment a verse came to mind: “For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

This emphatic reminder brought me back to the foundation of our faith, to the basic truths about Jesus. I realized that my enthusiastic descriptions of distinctive Brethren in

Christ convictions assumed the undergirding tenets of our faith. This is fine when we talk among ourselves because we share the same assumptions, but it is woefully inadequate in conversations with people who have different assumptions or beliefs. From that time on, I started conversations with the Good News of salvation and, later, introduced the contextual emphases of the Brethren in Christ.

To introduce new adherents, I photocopied excerpts of a talk given in 1973, titled “The Brethren in Christ Accent,” by John Zercher, longtime editor of our denominational magazine. With a Gospel presentation and this homemade booklet, I had a workable approach to introduce people to Jesus and invite them into an emerging Brethren in Christ church.

This makeshift approach was sufficient for people to come to faith and a church to be established. But I knew there had to be a better way. To effectively start and grow churches in places where we are not known, I felt, we needed a compact description of basic tenets of the Christian faith as understood by our church. The summary would need to place the Brethren in Christ squarely in the stream of beliefs, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “common to nearly all Christians at all times,” yet with the nuances and “accents” that accurately describe our unique place in the Christian faith community. The summary would need to be in everyday language, so that it could be understood by persons unfamiliar with our history and doctrine. And, optimally, it would need to be both compact and substantive, a tightly-worded synopsis of who we are and what we believe.

When I was appointed to denominational leadership as general secretary in 1996, I had the opportunity to bring this desire for a clear and concise description of the Brethren in Christ into wider denominational conversation. The Leadership Council agreed that a collaborative endeavor to articulate our values would be an asset to the church.

A proven way to garner the views of a



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EDITOR

Harriet Sider Bicksler
127 Holly Dr.
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055
EMAIL: bickhouse@aol.com

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Eddie Asbury, Mechanicsburg, PA

DENOMINATIONAL LIAISON

Lynn Thrush, Tipp City, OH

EDITORIAL ADVISOR

Lois Saylor, Harrisburg, PA

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faith community of about 25,000 people was to convene a consultation, an approach commonly used among groups with Anabaptist roots that value consensus. This involves gathering a representative group of people from across the church to talk together, face-to-face. Effectively managed, such representative conversation has the potential to coalesce into common understandings. That, of course, is much easier said than done.

We designed the consultation to be a dynamic conversation among participants in different configurations: as a whole group, in eight small groups, and in informal conversations over breaks and mealtimes. We assigned a listening team to distill all of this interaction into successive iterations of proposed wording. By this process, we dared to hope that fifty-two persons, all with robust convictions and, among them, more than a few strong personalities, could agree on the foundational convictions of the Brethren in Christ, a high-risk venture!

We set out with four primary aims. First, we wanted to accurately describe the values of the Brethren in Christ. Though we would draw on our history and doctrine for these value statements, we wanted to describe who we are.

Second, we wanted to use language, as C. S. Lewis encouraged, that would be clear and

accessible to everyone. Further, we needed language that could have resonance with persons with divergent or secular convictions.

Third, like the Gospel itself, we wanted the convictions and traits we would describe to be perceived as good news. The value statements were not to be watered-down, but substantive truths, stated positively.

Finally, we wanted to accomplish all of this in as few words as possible. We needed to sift through the mountain of words we had read and considered beforehand and reduce them to a cupful of words packed with meaning.

Through two days, in an interplay of small group and whole group interaction, everyone engaged actively and productively. The listening team crafted the emerging consensus into clear words and phrases. Yet with all this, the Holy Spirit carried the day with interventions far beyond our combined human capabilities.

One striking indication of the Spirit's oversight and enabling presence was the commonality of heart. No one attempted to push a point of view at the expense of others. At times, persons even advocated for points of view other than their own!

In another instance in one of the final sessions, we collectively stepped back to look at the nine statements we had articulated to

that point. Someone said, "There is nothing yet about prayer." The group agreed, and we crafted a tenth value.

Finally, in a way none of us could fully anticipate, the Spirit shaped these values to communicate the good news of our life together in Christ. In ten tight statements, we asserted our commonality with the bedrock beliefs of all Christians everywhere. We rejoiced in the centrality of salvation in Jesus Christ. We described an appealing quality of life in community. And we realized that we have an important contribution to make to the larger community of Christians.

These ten core values are the ones the Holy Spirit has entrusted to the Brethren in Christ. They describe our faith and life as this has developed over two hundred years. They depict who we are and who we want to be. They sum up the good news we offer to a broken and hurting world. Though shaped by many people over many years and, in particular, 52 participants in a consultation twenty years ago, they are, above all, a gift of the Holy Spirit to be used to build up the body of Christ (1 Peter 4:10).

Warren Hoffman is a retired pastor, bishop, and denominational leader, most recently serving as interim bishop of the Pacific Conference. He lives in Elizabethtown, PA.

Revisiting Our Core Values: Sentimental Slogans or Compelling Convictions?

by Terry L. Brensinger

WHAT DISTINGUISHES A sentimental slogan from a compelling conviction? The intrinsic truthfulness or force of the words themselves? Or the manner and extent to which those words are expressed and used? Phrased differently, might truly compelling statements lose their impact—i.e., become sentimental slogans—through misuse or neglect, and might less dynamic statements gain unanticipated influence—i.e., become compelling convictions—through inspired and consistent usage? While the answer to both of these questions is of course, "Yes," the first is in my experience far

more prevalent. How might we use our core values in the most effective ways?

Contemporary trends: Using our core values effectively requires an understanding of various trends evident in contemporary culture and their potential impact on the Church and its mission. While there are any number of such trends, I want to briefly mention only four.

Integrity: It wasn't too long ago that critiques of the Church centered on matters of purpose and relevance. The Church has lost its privileged position in society and is now "meaningless," people often said, "out of

touch with the real world." "The sermons are boring, the music antiquated, and the initiatives self-serving." While such sentiments remain in force and no doubt always will, current critiques of the Church increasingly focus on integrity. For many people today, the Church is suspect and even immoral. If it's not deceptive fundraising techniques and the misappropriation of resources, it's abusive clergy, power-mongering, or downright bigotry. Today the Church is evaluated not only on utilitarian or practical grounds, but on ethical ones.

Fragmentation: The trend in contempo-

rary culture is toward fragmentation and polarization. Increasingly, competing groups appear in virtually every sector of society—groups that rarely demonstrate tolerance of, let alone appreciation for, more moderate groups. Further, such competing groups not only fail to engage alternative voices in meaningful ways, but often want to silence them.

Declining church involvement: Long gone are the days when people participated in church life either because it was their civic duty or because it gave them something to do. Today, people's schedules are jammed and their connections maintained through social media.

As a result of these and other factors, participation in the local church continues to drop. Regular attenders are now typically classified as those who show up in church at least twice a month. More and more young people, particularly white, refer to themselves as “Nones”—that is, they do not identify with any church or religious tradition.

dcx.Anxiety: Ours is a fear-based culture, and the fear that permeates contemporary society rears its ugly head in virtually every area of life. To the list of age-old fears—sickness, unemployment, rejection—we seem to add new ones daily, such as identity theft, unpredictable economic forces, climate change, and global dependence.

Engaging our core values

In such a context, it is vital that the Church, to quote Jesus, act “as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves.” To do that, it is one thing to identify core values and quite another thing to put them into practice. In exploring how we might become more disciplined and use our core values more effectively to carry out our prophetic mission in today's world, I'm using as a template three categories familiar to all educators.

Learning outcomes: The educational enterprise begins with the development of program and student learning outcomes. These outcomes describe who we want our students to be and what we hope they will be able to do. In short, they address the question of identity.

As a starting point, let me suggest a few learning outcomes based on our core values that are faithful to our Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan heritage. People who participate in the life of our congregations will in-

creasingly:

- Grow in their love for and dependence upon God (core values 3 and 10).
- Believe that they and those they minister to can be fundamentally changed into the likeness of Christ (core value 1).
- Balance sound biblical theology with compassionate, Christ-like living (core values 2 and 7)
- Understand the depth of the Gospel and its profound relevance to even the world's most complex needs (core value 2, 6 and 7).
- Share the good news of Jesus with family, friends and neighbors (core value 6).
- View themselves first and foremost, not as citizens of an earthly kingdom, but as followers of Jesus (core values 4 and 5).
- Seek to live in and promote peace with all people (core value 8).
- Free themselves from unwanted and unhealthy attachments (core value 9).
- Recognize that God is mysterious and powerful, not to be tamed and reduced to our own way of thinking (core value 10).

As these and other learning outcomes demonstrate, our core values can help us clarify who we are and what we are trying to accomplish. In short, they provide the content for rich and helpful learning outcomes.

Strategic planning: After clarifying our learning outcomes, we must plan strategically if we hope to actually achieve those outcomes. Both long-term and short-term strategic planning deserve our time and most creative energies, and they occur in various ways and forms.

Congregational participation: Strategic planning related to our core values takes place at all levels of congregational and denominational life. As a simple starting point, ensure that the following question is asked at all gatherings and meetings: “How do our core values relate to and inform the priorities we set, decisions we make, and initiatives we plan?”

Awareness: Like signs hung on doorposts, our core values need to be consistently expressed and faithfully interpreted. Expressing and interpreting our values in this way takes place both formally and informally. Formally, we plan periodic sermon series, post our values on the website and other media, display

banners, enact skits, and perhaps even distribute mugs.

In addition to such formal depictions, we can express and interpret our core values informally. Imagine, for example, a pastor pausing during the sermon and simply commenting, “It is times of difficulty like this when we need to remind each other of our final core value—‘We must depend on God and live prayerfully.’”

Strategic examples: As awareness rises and congregational participation increases, strategic planning will become more engaging, creative, and constructive. Instead of simply rehashing church news, reviewing the budget, and approving minutes from the previous meeting, people will use the core values to envision fresh ways of interfacing redemptively with others in the congregation as well as those outside.

Assessment: At a formal level, we can use our core values as a template to ensure appropriate curricular materials, balanced worship and preaching, effective outreach activities, and so on. Like banners tied around doorposts, our core values can remind us again and again of who we are and what we are called to do. At a deeper level, the core values can be used in a wide range of initiatives that help evaluate the actual changes that are taking place in the lives of our people. While it can be difficult to assess spiritual development, it is possible to measure effectively much of what appears in our core values and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Clearly, while the truthfulness of the core value words themselves is unarguably important, there are countless “true” phrases and statements buried irretrievably on thumb drives all around the world. Hopefully, our Brethren in Christ core values are not among them. Instead, if we commit ourselves to a dynamic and consistent use of these core values, we will discover a wide range of creative opportunities to serve effectively in our contemporary world.

Terry Brensinger is the editor of Focusing Our Faith: The Brethren in Christ Core Values (Evangelical Press, 2000). This article is condensed from a longer presentation at the 2018 Sider Institute conference and subsequently published in the April 2019 edition of Brethren in Christ History and Life.

The Brethren in Christ Mosaic

by Heather Beaty

MOSAICS HAVE ALWAYS fascinated me. Thousands of individual pieces of glass or ceramic repurposed to create a brilliant and cohesive image. Broken pieces, uniquely formed and quite uninspiring when isolated, become a clear and compelling picture when intentionally placed by an artist's hand. Mosaic masterpieces illustrate the power of vision and the importance of cohesion.

We are a mosaic. The Brethren in Christ mosaic.

We, as thousands of individuals who have committed to this covenant community, comprise a living, breathing, visible expression of the church. We are the Brethren in Christ. We, unique and diverse individuals living in community, have vowed “before God and fellow members to live a holy life, to remain loyal to the church, and to foster oneness within the body of Christ” (*Articles of Faith and Doctrine*, 2022). These are commitments based on the very life and teaching of Jesus, who prayed that we would be unified and declared that the world would know we are his disciples by how we love and live together.

Yet, some within the Brethren in Christ community ask, “How do we live out this covenant community ideal? Is this possible in a culture that is so individualistic and polarized—especially when we have local congregations that embody vastly different expressions of worship, priorities, and perspectives? Can we find unity and shared purpose while celebrating diversity?”

As illustrated in mosaic art, differences can be beautiful. They bring creative texture and perspective. Differences bring color and life to a blank canvas. Without some kind of unifying vision and strong cohesion, however, these same differences have the potential to produce chaos and confusion.

I love the differences represented in our Brethren in Christ mosaic. Our local expressions of worship and service are uniquely contextualized. We affirm local governance and encourage individuals and congregations to prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit's leading for ministry and vision. What a beautiful

gift!

Yet, this very gift can also cause tension and conflict. Our differences sometimes prompt confusion and chaos. They can lead to increased debate and decreased Kingdom impact, if we fail to keep our central mission in view and to reaffirm our common strengths and commitments.

D. Ray Hostetter, former president of Messiah College, in the book entitled, *The Soul of the Brethren in Christ: Essays on Church Identity*, admonishes the church to thoughtfully consider our unique identity as a strong foundation for a clear and vital sense of mission in an increasingly diverse culture. While celebrating differences that enrich and enliven, we must also reaffirm that which unites. Our unique denominational distinctives hold us together and keep us focused, while at the same time providing missional momentum and freedom within the local context.

As individuals, we have a responsibility to pursue integrity, or consistency in belief and action. When I committed to membership in the Brethren in Christ Church, I was choosing to affirm my commitment to Christ as well as my personal alignment with this church family's interpretation of Scripture, appreciation for Brethren in Christ traditions and practices, and commitment to my local church. To do this with integrity required an understanding of the doctrine and ordinances of the denomination and the practices and priorities of my local congregation. When I became a credentialed minister in the Brethren in Christ Church, living with integrity meant that I was committing to teaching and leading in a manner consistent with the church family's values and positions.

As a denominational family, we have a responsibility to work together to reaffirm our historic values while clarifying our doctrinal positions in response to cultural questions of the day. Bishops dialogue with incoming pastors to help them assess alignment with our distinct principles and priorities and explore how these intersect with their unique gifting and calling. New pastors engage with

Brethren in Christ distinctives in core courses and impact seminars and then apply these themes in their local setting. Writing teams and focus groups address specific topics, and the broader community engages in these conversations during regional meetings, Zoom discussions, and General Assembly.

Most importantly, local pastors help congregations understand and apply foundational denominational distinctives in transformative and missional ways within their local context. Many pastors use our core values as a helpful tool for introducing and reaffirming our family principles and priorities in local congregations. Pastors around the world repeatedly identify the core values as the simplest and most unifying statements about who we are as a covenant community of Christ-followers. The core values tie us together trans-nationally as they clearly state shared priorities emanating from our historic streams.

This is likely why the reaffirmation of these core values came forth as the number one priority in Project 250. In order to maintain integrity and missional momentum, we must continue to reaffirm these core values while discerning the ways in which God is prompting us to live out those values in our immediate community and cultural context.

In the Susquehanna Conference, our pastors are finding creative ways to promote and pursue an appreciation for these core values in the local church. Sometimes, pastors refer to these family values in their preaching. This helps the whole congregation better understand our distinctives as they explore how to live these out as the visible church in their local community. The core values are discussed in many newcomer conversations and in almost all membership classes. Our core values are also referenced by church boards as they evaluate the effectiveness of local initiatives and determine budget allocations. The core values are discussed in learning communities and small groups. In these settings, brothers and sisters evaluate how the core values have impacted their personal

practices and hold each other accountable for the ways in which they are living.

Are we actively and lovingly sharing the gospel with our neighbors? Are we pursuing peace in our congregation and community? How are we choosing to live simply so that we can live more generously? Is all that we do based on the authority of Scripture?

Our ten core values are the “cement” that unifies and energizes so that we continue to pursue holiness and oneness even as we celebrate diverse giftings of individuals and congregations. The Master Artist has formed a beautiful mosaic of Brethren in Christ, and the more united we are in the values which hold us together, the more we will remain

missionally effective in an ever-changing culture.

Heather Beaty is bishop of the Susquehanna Conference of Brethren in Christ U.S.

Stories Every Brethren in Christ Person Should Know

By Devin Manzullo-Thomas

STORYTELLING IS A powerful way to share a community’s values. For a faith community such as the Brethren in Christ Church, storytelling is a means for passing on our heritage from generation to generation, for forming identity among people who are new to our congregations, and for bridging the gap between the past and the present. As my mentor E. Morris Sider, the dean of Brethren in Christ history, has written, “We do have a good heritage to communicate. Let’s work at communicating it effectively. Let’s tell stories!”

In his 2018 book, *Stories and Scenes from a Brethren in Christ Heritage*, Sider puts his conviction into action, sharing numerous stories that illustrate our historical and contemporary values as Brethren in Christ. In this article, I will share a few more stories to compliment the ones he has already provided. What follows are stories that I think every Brethren in Christ person should know, because of how vividly and powerfully they communicate our shared faith.

No Turning Back: Pioneering the Cause of Foreign Missions

Over one hundred and twenty years ago, an intrepid band of Brethren in Christ with a passion for spreading the gospel set out from North America. Sailing from New York City in December 1897, they journeyed three thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean and eventually made their way to the Matopo Hills in Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) by summer 1898. The arrival of these strange-looking white men and women by donkey-drawn wagon must have sent waves of shock and confusion through the Ndebele people who had long occupied the land. Indeed, initially the mis-

sionaries struggled to communicate their message. But there was no turning back. Eventually, some young people responded, and the missionaries held the first baptism in August 1899.

Seven years later, one member of this intrepid band—a Pennsylvania-born woman named Hannah Frances Davidson—felt God’s call to do more. Responding to the Spirit’s prompting, Davidson and another female missionary, Adda Engle, and two young Ndebele boys journeyed nearly five hundred miles north, into present-day Zambia, where they established Macha Mission. Today, it’s hard to fathom what that experience must have been like for two women—traveling long distances in an unfamiliar place, led forward solely by their persevering faith and their reliance on God. But, again, there was no turning back.

The work of these early missionaries sparked a passion among Brethren in Christ for the cause of global witness and service. Over the years North American missionaries have contributed to the establishment of thirty national Brethren in Christ conferences, associations, or church clusters in places beyond North America, and the ministry of Brethren in Christ World Missions continues today, with sixty-nine cross-cultural workers engaged in twenty countries. As a result, today 80 percent of Brethren in Christ congregations are outside North America.

Heeding God’s Call: Serving Sacrificially in the Big City

The bustling metropolis of Chicago—choked by unemployment, flooded with immigrants, and plagued by tenement housing, unjust working conditions, and dangerous

vices—was not an easy place to live in the late nineteenth century. Yet it was the city to which Sarah H. Bert, a pioneering urban missionary, moved in 1894 to follow God’s call on her life.

Born in 1860, Bert was a frail, timid Kansas farmgirl who felt the Spirit drawing her to work with the poor and outcast. Against all odds, she made the Windy City her home, ministering there for more than fifty years and becoming the first-ever female superintendent of a Brethren in Christ mission. Bert never married—not an easy decision in an era when women had fewer legal rights and less financial security than men. And yet her singleness enabled her to connect more easily with the young urban women to whom she ministered through sewing classes and Bible lessons.

Her legacy can be summarized in the words she herself used to describe urban ministry in 1904: “Few would ever get to God if there were no deeds of kindness scattered along their path by Christian hearts and loving hands.”

Curing Hate with Love: Pursuing Peace in a World at War

For generations, Brethren in Christ people have declared their strong conviction that the Bible calls followers of Jesus to practice nonviolence and pursue peace. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during times of national and international conflict, they witnessed publicly to this call by refusing to join the military. Such was the case for Ernest J. Swalm of Ontario, Canada. In early 1918, as World War I intensified, the Canadian government fortified its military by drafting all men between the ages of 20-23, with no exceptions. When his draft letter

arrived, Swalm did not resist the order—but he refused to put on the military uniform or pick up arms. For his refusal, he was imprisoned and subject to verbal and even physical abuse at the hands of military officials. After four months of incarceration, he was released and returned home.

About twenty-five years later, amid a Second World War, young Brethren in Christ church members launched a movement for active peacemaking. No longer content that their witness involved only refusing to enlist in the military, these Brethren in Christ pursued a more active form of peacemaking. Joining with fellow Christians, including Mennonites and Quakers, they confronted the senseless devastation wrought by war through direct relief and recovery efforts: distributing clothing, rebuilding homes and churches, and ministering to those in need. Among the Brethren in Christ who journeyed abroad was Elsie C. Bechtel, a member of Valley Chapel congregation (Canton, Ohio). From 1945-1948, Bechtel lived and worked in a tiny village in south-central France, caring for children displaced or orphaned by the war. Before leaving the US, she expressed her desire to combat the world's evil with active love. "Curing hate by love" may seem absurd, she wrote, but Christians can pour out such love "recklessly" because "our God is the God of love and there

is no limit to His supply." Her model of active peacemaking would influence generations of Brethren in Christ after her.

The Fruits of Evangelism: Growing Los Hermanos en Cristo in Miami and Beyond

In the mid-1980s, Eduardo Llanes was at a crossroads. Born and raised in Cuatro Caminos, Cuba, and converted to Christianity by Brethren in Christ missionaries, Eduardo later immigrated to the United States and served as a pastor and seminary professor. But he now felt God calling him to some new work. He soon received an invitation from the denomination Church to consider a church planting ministry among Hispanic immigrants in Miami, Florida. Along with his wife, Jill, and their two daughters, Eduardo boldly stepped out in faith into a new venture.

For the first several years, his outreach efforts kept failing—he could not keep a new congregation together. In the late 1980s, he had a chance encounter with an old friend, Mery Perenzuela, whom he had known in Cuba and who later became a minister in the Church of the Nazarene. Together, Eduardo and Mery started again—and, over time, others joined them.

Over the next thirty-plus years, in what can only be described as a sovereign act of God, that single worshipping community

has grown into a vibrant network of more than fifty congregations. Today, the Miami metropolitan region is home to the third-largest concentration of Brethren in Christ churches in North America, after central Pennsylvania and Ontario, Canada. And as a result of this tremendous growth, on any given Sunday morning, about one-fifth of all Brethren in Christ churches in the United States worship in Spanish.

The growth among los Hermanos en Cristo in Miami and beyond testifies to Eduardo's reliance on God and to the power of Spirit-led outreach and evangelism. As Jill Llanes observed in 1994, "People ask, 'Well, what did you do?' I don't know what we did. It's just one of those things that the Lord has really blessed . . . We just came [to Miami] at a time that it was right for us to come, and the Lord had been here ahead of time, preparing the way."

Devin Manzullo-Thomas is assistant professor of American religious history at Messiah University, where he also serves as director of the Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan Studies and as director of the Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives. Portions of this article were previously published, in a slightly different format, in In Part, the magazine of the Brethren in Christ Church U.S. from 2004-2016.

The Identity of the Brethren in Christ

By John R. Yeatts

THE BRETHERN IN Christ have always used the name "Brethren." Originally we referred to ourselves as simply the "Brethren." Later, our neighbors called us "River Brethren," likely because of our location near the Susquehanna River. During the Civil War we adopted the name Brethren in Christ. The name "Brethren" witnesses to our communal identity." But what is that identity we share as sisters and brothers?

According to Carlton Wittinger, Brethren in Christ historian, several "crucial ideas" gave us identity at the beginning.

The Scriptures: We accepted "the authority of Scripture, with special attention to the New Testament as the highest level of God's

revelation. . . . [T]he Brethren took the text seriously and sought to conform their lives to . . . its obvious meaning. . . . [understood through] corporate rather than private interpretation of Scripture."

The conversion experience: Only as repentant sinners cast themselves on the mercy of God who worked in them the miracle of regeneration or the new birth could they join the ranks of the redeemed and share the fellowship of the new church. . . . Obedience was an integral part of the conversion experience.

The visible Church: The early Brethren perceived the church to be the visible people of God, the community of born again, obe-

dient, disciplined, interdependent, Christians in face to face fellowship....

The hostile world: While the visible community of the converted sought to follow Christ fully, surrounding evil forces contrary to the spirit of this community were bent on its destruction.

These "crucial ideas" may, on the surface, appear somewhat common among Christians. Nevertheless, John Zercher, former editor of the *Evangelical Visitor*, affirms that Brethren in Christ have an "Accent" that distinguishes the way we address these "crucial issues." The Brethren in Christ accent stresses "authority in contrast to inspiration" of the Scriptures; places "the Old Testament

in subjection to the New Testament, especially to Christ;” and recognizes that learning “the truth of Scripture [comes] in the fellowship of the church.” Conversion among Brethren in Christ stresses obedience and discipleship. To us, the church is both a worshipping community, and a “family of faith with familial responsibilities and benefits.” The Brethren in Christ accent includes separation from the world by living a holy life where the ultimate test of the Spirit’s presence is “ethical and moral rather than experience and emotional.”

Today, these four “crucial ideas” have expanded into ten “core values.” Although they might also appear to be values common to all Christians, the Brethren in Christ have what Zercher calls a specific “accent” that makes them somewhat unique to the denomination.

Experiencing God’s love and grace: This core value is rooted in pietism, the stream that formed the Brethren in Christ and motivated change like accepting Holiness and Evangelicalism. Perhaps this core value is most central to the church.

Believing the Bible: Our identity has always been rooted in practicing the Bible understood in community as authority for life (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Worshipping God: From revival services and experience meetings to inspiring worship and uplifting retreats, Brethren in Christ people offer our lives as spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).

Following Jesus: The Brethren in Christ focus our study of the Bible on Jesus to make his life a pattern for our life in the church and the world. With Paul we say: “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Belonging to the community of faith: For the Brethren in Christ, individual faith is subordinate to church discipline, which does not force conformity but “listens” to one another to hear God’s will in community (Matt. 18:15-17).

Witnessing to the world: Brethren in Christ witness has always been focused on both making “disciples” and “teaching them to observe everything” Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20).

Serving compassionately: The Brethren in Christ have loved others by building hospitals and schools around the world, contributing to the Compassion Fund, and caring for people in food banks and homeless shelters, among many other things (Matt. 25:31-46).

Pursuing peace: We choose alternatives to military service and live peacefully in interpersonal and community relationships (Rom. 12:9-21).

Living simply: In early years, this meant separation from the world by dressing simply and employing useful rather than ornamental furnishings. Today, that means dressing modestly, stewarding time, and limiting expenditures (Rom 12:2).

Relying on God: In practicing all our core values, we recognize reliance on God (Matt. 6:9-13).

Our core values come with our special accent and taken together they identify us as Brethren in Christ.

Lisa Weaver Swartz’s ethnological study of pastors today focuses on our core value (see “A Giant Bag of Core Values: Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, August 2022.). One pastor with family lineage of several generations of Brethren in Christ pastors speaks of ambiva-

lence toward his church, but concludes: “the Anabaptist church tradition has. . . something important to offer the world, and that makes it worth staying.” Another pastor speaks of the affect of the world on our tradition: “We’ve closed the door, oftentimes, to outside influence, but we never lock it. . . . We close it because we are proud of what we are, but we don’t lock it because we’re open to making sure that we can listen.” Weaver Swartz summarizes:

Anabaptism, with its peace position, apoliticism, and Christocentric focus, remains an animating force among [BIC]—one that may be increasing in salience amidst growing animosity for Evangelicalism. Pietism’s legacy also persists, sustaining humility, personal spirituality, and winsome generosity.

Nevertheless, Weaver Swartz suggests the Brethren in Christ have a “deficit in collective memory” and are a “denomination in deep need of identity work.” She concludes: “Even the pastors who displayed the most commitment to robust BIC identity did not share an oeuvre of rituals, artifacts, and narratives. . . . But stories are an important basis for group identity. They ground the present in the past. They provide frames of shared meaning. They spark prophetic imagination.

Oral traditions around the world witness that cultural values are maintained through story-telling. If our core values are important and distinctive enough, we will develop ways to preserve them by telling our stories to the next generation.

John R. Yeatts, PhD is professor emeritus at Messiah University and senior pastor emeritus at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Project 250 Goal #1

Reaffirming Our Identity as a Community of Christ-followers

We are committed to developing and implementing plans and strategies that will engage Brethren in Christ 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 #1:* Increase understanding and awareness of our core values *Objective #2:* Update the Focusing Our Faith book and include core practices. *Objective #3:* Have Brethren in Christ con-

gregations 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.

Read more at bicus.org/project-250.

Place, People, and Values: Reaffirming Our Identity as a Community of Christ-Followers

By Jennifer Lancaster

INSPIRED BY OUR past and positioned for our future, part of Project 250 is an effort to grow in our collective Brethren in Christ identity so we are equipped to respond to the world around us. Through this project we are making space for Brethren in Christ U.S. congregations to rethink its paradigms of ministry. Congregational attentiveness to their place in the community and people whom they seek to serve, alongside our collective core values each inform the way(s) we exhibit a Brethren in Christ identity.

Aspect 1: Place

Among rapid social and cultural changes, the church must explore and better understand its place in the community. As the local church recognizes these social and cultural shifts, it is critical to re-framing ministry. As Tod Bolsinger rightly asserts, “We are not adapting to merely survive but to thrive! We are called to adapt to a changing world because we are called to reach that changing world.” Ministry focusing on individual discipleship, community connection and transformation are all aspects of thriving congregations and contribute to our shared identity and values.

Changing social dynamics have implications for the church. It is important to pause and recognize what has changed around us. From there, we must then ask how the church positions itself to respond. Attentiveness to posture is crucial before any attempt at action. Throughout this process, Brethren in Christ U.S. seeks to uphold a posture that promotes learning, mutuality, and compassion. As the church articulates its identity and mission it can better position itself to address the needs of its place (i.e. community). It is the desire of Brethren in Christ U.S. to guide congregations to a deepening sense of practice. To this end, how might the church serve as a relevant space to address social concerns and provide a community for individuals to thrive, grow, and make disciples?

Aspect 2: People

A recent US Surgeon General Advisory

report, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, suggests that, while wired for social connection, our society is increasingly isolated. Given this reality, the church’s ability to foster community through acts of neighborliness plays a positive role in re-establishing vital social connections, which benefit individual health and well-being. Brethren in Christ U.S. congregations are positioned to confront the societal loneliness and isolation as expressed in the US Surgeon General Advisory report by embracing a model of church focusing on community connection.

For instance, increased social fragmentation, negative aspects of tribalism, and a pervasive culture of fear each influence congregational life and ministry. In her article, “The Impact of Evolving Neighborhood Demographics,” Diana Butler Bass argues that at its worst, tribalism leads to being “increasingly isolated from one another, suspicious of those who are different, surrounded by the invisible fencing of fear.” If that is the case, how might the local congregation dispel myths related to the other and lean into relationship-building across communities?

Another social factor to consider is the role of the “nones,” those Americans that researchers categorize as having no religion at all. Estimated numbers place the “nones” somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of the US population. While some “nones” never had a religious affiliation, the increase of this group is largely attributed to people leaving the Church. In a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, Perry Bacon expresses how he found himself counted among the “nones” after being raised in the church, saying:

So between early 2017 and early 2020, I went from someone who clearly defined himself as a Christian and attended the same church most Sundays to someone who wasn’t sure about Christianity but was still kind of shopping for a new religious home and going to a service every few weeks.

Aspect 3: Values

The Brethren in Christ U.S. core values serve

as a source of vision and hope for congregations facing difficult social and cultural challenges. They serve as guideposts for church leaders, and laity to better understand how to live. Because so much of our identity is defined by what we teach and what we do, we must develop a consistent hermeneutic and deep sense of praxis related to the core values. A robust hermeneutic related to the core values enables us to preach and teach with intention. Likewise, the collective practices we affirm, such as simplicity, piety, covenant community, and serving, become opportunities to live out the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:34-40).

In 2024, Brethren in Christ U.S. will release a new book, *Compelling Convictions*, to revisit the core values through a twenty-first century lens. Taking into account the social and cultural changes mentioned above, the core values can equip us to engage the world differently. It is important to recognize that the values do not change. The ten values, central to our Brethren in Christ identity, continue to speak into the life of the church, even as the world around us changes. In fact, D. Ray Hostetter, in his 2009 book on Brethren in Christ, identity, encourages this process, saying, “the values of a religious group, even if enduring in nature, need to be continually expressed in new ways.” And so, the new work aims to express the collective voice of the church and to provide the kind of fresh expression Hostetter believes is deserving of our values.

Jennifer Lancaster is project coordinator for Project 250 for Brethren in Christ U.S. She attends the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Choosing What I Did Not Choose

By Adam Forry

IN A SERMON I preached some time back about dealing with life's trials, I quoted an author who wrote about "choosing what you did not choose" (Jacques Philippe). The context of his writing was accepting difficult circumstances as an opportunity for God to work. I would like to coopt this phrase for a very different context: describing my journey with the Brethren in Christ Church. As a "cradle BIC," I did not originally choose to be part of the Brethren in Christ; that choice was made for me by my parents, and by generations of my father's family before them, who were a long-time part of the Mount Pleasant Brethren in Christ Church in Mount Joy, PA. Eventually, it was my privilege to be able to "choose what I did not choose," and to embrace this Brethren in Christ family and movement of churches as my own.

As a result of family and church influences in my life, I received Christ as my personal Savior at age 8. At that time, I wanted to have the assurance of heaven when I died, so in our home, my mom led me in a prayer of repentance and acceptance of the salvation offered through Jesus. Most of the rest of my childhood and teen years were guided by my desire to live a life that was pleasing to God in the way I treated others and in my own personal conduct. At age 12, I was baptized as a public confession of my faith and welcomed as a member of the Mount Pleasant congregation. Throughout my teen years, I was active as a participant and leader in the church youth group and Bible quiz team and served in ministry as a preschool helper, drama participant, and worship team singer. In addition to finding Jesus in church, I found community, support, and the freedom to be me that was unmatched anywhere else. Over these years, I became convinced of God's unique work through the church.

My college years were a pivotal time of setting me on the trajectory that my life has continued on to this day. For most of my four years at Messiah College, I worked toward a teaching certificate for middle and high school social studies; but, throughout

those years, I also had an interest in pastoral ministry, owing to my earlier formative experiences in church. I was able to do two summer internships, not for credit or payment, in my home church and another church, as a way to get a taste of pastoral work. By the time I graduated in 1999, I was ready to pursue a call to pastoral ministry.

Over the course of twenty years of pastoral work, my passions and gifts for ministry have been honed. Christ's straightforward call to "make disciples" has continued to motivate me. From reaching out to people distant from God to discipling them in early steps of faith to seeing them move out in ministry and mission, I have loved being part of the process of spiritual growth in the lives of others. Using my gifts of leadership, administration, wisdom, and teaching to guide local churches in being part of that process has been immensely fulfilling for me. And then my joy has been multiplied as other leaders and I have mobilized the church to have an impact on the local community, and even the world, through serving our neighbors with the love of Jesus.

When I reflect on what has led me to choose what I did not choose, I am reminded of an observation made by Owen Alderfer in his essay on "The Brethren Mindset" (*Brethren in Christ History and Life*, April 1984) In essence, Alderfer suggests that among the Brethren in Christ, trusting relationships have been more important than absolute doctrinal uniformity. In applying that to my own experience, what kept me in the Brethren in Christ Church through my teen years and beyond had more to do with significant relationships than my agreement with every point of Brethren in Christ doctrine. I cannot pinpoint a singular moment or moments where I chose what I did not choose in remaining a part of the Brethren in Christ, but I can identify some of the most influential relationships that led me to do so.

I suspect that my experience fits well with the broader narrative of Brethren in Christ church growth in North America since the 1950s. It was then that our denomination

began to incorporate values and methods from Evangelicalism into its synthesis of Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan belief and practice. In his seminal article on the three or four streams of Brethren in Christ theology, Luke Keefer Jr. (*Brethren in Christ History and Life*, April 1996) made the case that Evangelicalism overshadowed the other three streams. Thus, as new converts were folded into the life of the church, many were welcomed into congregations that were, on the surface, broadly Evangelical/Pietist. Congruent with my own experience, these converts were not won over primarily by the appeal of Brethren in Christ doctrinal distinctives; they came to trust Jesus and join the church through relationships with Brethren in Christ people.

As I reflect on my own encounter with the Brethren in Christ synthesis, I entered pastoral ministry in the late 1990s, serving several church plants where the Evangelical/Pietist stream was at the forefront. In these contexts, I appreciated the hearts of the leaders and congregations for reaching people far from God and their willingness to make that a priority over the whims and preferences of church "insiders." Yet in those settings, Anabaptist and Wesleyan values were not widely known or promoted; I saw them championed by other Brethren in Christ pastors who were passionate advocates of one or the other, taught in core courses, and discussed by those in general church leadership, but not clearly on display in the churches.

In my own discipleship journey, I have come to a deeper place of resonance particularly with the values of our Anabaptist heritage. The emphasis on community life, radical discipleship, simplicity, and peace and reconciliation speak profoundly to me and embody the kind of life I believe Jesus desires for his followers. In my pastoral ministry, this is the "normal Christian life" that I want to call people to.

When I return to the question of why I am Brethren in Christ, the most compelling conclusion that I come to is that I love our historical willingness to seek to reconcile dif-

ferences and to live with tensions. More than any one of our streams, I truly do value the tension between them. For example, I see the Anabaptist convictions about outward obedience in tension with Pietist principles of inner devotion; and the “in the world” engagement of Evangelicalism is stretched by the “not of the world” separateness of Wesleyan holiness. Wrestling with these tensions helps us as Brethren in Christ to be faithful to Jesus’s call to be and to make disciples. Religion professor Richard Hughes has referred to the Brethren in Christ as “perhaps the only church over the past five hundred years

to have borrowed in substantial ways from each of the four major Reformation traditions of the sixteenth century” in weaving a “theological coat of many colors.” Reconciliation is at the heart of our calling as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21), and I am delighted that reconciliation is also at the core of our church identity.

Though I did not originally choose the Brethren in Christ, I am thankful for those who chose it for me and exposed me to the beauty (and even the tensions) of this church family. The relationships formed have meant much to me and only increased my joy when

I came to the place of choosing what I did not choose—the mosaic of belief and practice formed out of the four streams of our heritage that continue to make us who we are today and point us toward the future.

Adam Forry is senior pastor of the Elizabethtown (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. This article is condensed from his article in response to the question, “Why am I Brethren in Christ?” that was published in the August 2019 edition of Brethren in Christ History and Life.

continued from page 12

how food and serving and seating is done. edition There is a right way and breaking the “rules” is disconcerting for those who expect the “ritual” aspects to be observed even if unwritten or unspoken. Task-oriented activities can show who can make decisions and why. Ministry activities can indicate how the congregation perceives its place and function in the wider community. “Kitchen” or behind-the-scenes activities “make congregational life possible” and is “no less a part of congregational culture.” Is this work viewed as holy work or less-then?

Just as activities structure congregational time, artifacts structure the congregation’s space in “buildings and furnishings, altars and holy books, even cribs and dishes.” From displayed religious symbols to a parking lot, a congregation signals its values, its place in the community, and “assumptions about God, nature, humanity, itself, and others.” For example, “a visually rich environment may encourage silent individual meditation, while a visually neutral one may encourage human interaction.”

The last dimension of congregational identity is labeled accounts or the stories of the congregation. This includes the language—the distinctive vocabulary of a congregation, the history, and the “myths” (meaning the stories that hold a significance as to who the congregation is or what God has done among them), worldviews, theologues, and the symbols, images, and metaphors that have implicit meaning. In this aspect of identity there may be looming historical events that shape current understanding, or

a biblical story that holds particular meaning. These stories or accounts may speak to how a congregation sees itself. Is it a sanctuary providing safety from the world? Is it evangelistic seeing a need to reach the world? Does it value civic duties to promote and preserve what is good in the larger community? Or does it have an activist outlook seeing a need to address suffering and injustice?

While this handbook is oriented to the new staff or an analyst looking at a church, it may be interesting for a congregation to look at itself with a fresh approach. Ammerman suggests looking at the congregation with a theater critic’s eye. What are the set or the props telling you? Who are the actors? Who is the audience? What type of language is being used? Is there audience participation? How much? What are all these things communicating to a member and to a visitor? Is the play hard to understand and follow? Is it inviting? Is it solemn? Is it fun? Can you understand the meaning of the play?

And the play is not just Sunday morning worship. What does a children’s Sunday school class tell you? What does office space tell you? The question may be, how well do we know ourselves and how we are being perceived? What are we teaching and communicating by what we do, what we say, and how we look? Are we being who we want to be? Do we have our identity in Jesus? How are we being “Brethren in Christ”?

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Editor’s Notes

End-of-year contributions: We welcome your extra contributions as you close out your 2023 giving—or your renewal, if you forgot to renew your subscription this year. It’s not too late! You can contribute or renew online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/ or you can send a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S., to the editor at the address on page 2. Thank you for your continued support!

Topics for 2024:

The Winter edition will likely focus on Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the sheep and the goats, specifically the categories of people Jesus calls “the least of these”: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. What are we doing individually and corporately to meet their needs, not only immediate needs for food and clothing, etc., but also changes in government policy that will improve their lives (after all, this is in the context of judging nations)?

In anticipation of the 2024 General Assembly, the Spring edition will address the theme, “Formed to Follow.” What does it mean to follow Jesus and how do we do that faithfully and with integrity?

If you have additional ideas for topics or would like to write for *Shalom!*, contact the editor at bickhouse@aol.com.

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431 Grantham Rd., Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

BOOK REVIEW: Congregational Culture: A Study in Identity

By Lois Saylor

IN A HANDBOOK that discusses how to understand a religious congregation, the authors invite the reader “to engage in a systematic look at congregation life” (Nancy Ammerman, et al, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, Abingdon Press, 1998). One chapter focuses on culture and identity written by Ammerman. She looks at general aspects that define congregational culture, and then explores ways to understand the culture of a particular congregation.

In the general aspects of a congregation, Ammerman looks at (1) the specific religious and theological tradition of the larger denomination or at an independent congregation, as well as (2) the local flavor or “creativity” of the specific congregation. Then she suggests that (3) the larger culture surrounding the congregation adds to its distinctions. Is the congregation in the US and is it in Philadelphia, Miami, on the West Coast, or rural Ohio? Next she looks at (4) the regional, ethnic, social class, rural to urban settings, and generational attitudes that will significantly impact cultural identity. In addition, (5) the congregation’s relationship to the broader culture will also determine if the congregation sees itself set

apart from the culture or if it pursues engagement with the culture. Two last factors are size (6) and congregational history (7). Larger churches have more opportunity for subcultures to develop, and history, positive or negative, can affect the congregation’s sense of who they are, what they overcame or accomplished, and how they fit into their larger community setting.

The focus of the chapter then switches to a study of the dimensions of congregational identity located in activities, artifacts, and accounts or important stories. Activities begin with ritual. Rituals span the breadth of congregation life from how one is greeted at the door to the most “holy events.” Worship services are, of course, vital in this study as they are the “intentional presentation” of who the church perceives themselves to be and gives a unifying vision to its members. From a contemplative to an ecstatic worship experience, worship tells the observer something about the congregational identity. She also asks whether those who are leading worship are “permitted access to sacred spaces and expected to utter sacred words or read sacred texts that are forbidden to ordinary members”? Is there a more egalitarian stance and one that is equal among genders? Am-

merman cautions that “even congregations that pride themselves on equality may be experienced differently by women than by men.”

One can also learn about the congregation’s perception of God by listening to how God is addressed, what God is asked to do, and what is assumed about God’s nature. Does one hear about a God who sounds caring or one who is concerned about human behavior or a God who is holy? Special worship experiences can also translate the congregation’s beliefs, such as baptisms or Christmas and Easter celebrations. Does the church celebrate the Fourth of July? What is celebrated, and how is it a part of congregational identity?

Other ritual categories include religious education activities, fellowship activities, task-oriented activities, ministry activities, and “kitchen work” or the behind-the-scenes activities. Even though these activities are less formal they still hold rituals—the way things are and should be done. Educational activities show what is being taught and behavioral expectations for Christian living. Fellowship meals can communicate care for one another but will have different understandings of

continued on page 11