

Together

April 2023 • Issue 11

Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren



Hearing God's Voice
Within Community

God's Voice

One of my favorite hymns was born out of one of the most challenging and turbulent times in history. The author, Martin Rinkart, was a Lutheran pastor. He moved to Eilenberg, Saxony (Germany) in 1618. Eilenberg was a walled city that became a refuge for those fleeing the Thirty Years War. It became severely overcrowded, which led to deadly pestilence and famine. Eilenberg experienced further suffering when it was overrun by attacking armies three different times.

The Rinkart home became a haven for victims, even though Martin could barely feed his own family. An outbreak of the plague in the 1630's added to Martin's difficulties, leaving him as the town's only surviving pastor. At the height of the plague in 1637, Rinkart officiated at least fifty funerals a day, and more than 4,000 that year, including that of his own wife.

When I get stressed, depressed, or anxious over far less than what Pastor Rinkart went through, I think I have to rely on my own gifts and skills to handle the situation. This often leads to further stress and anxiety. As we look at the world around us and at the state of the church, I think many of our problems are caused by our own self-righteousness: thinking we have the answers and can handle the problems, which only leads to further turbulence. We stop listening for God's voice and begin to listen to our own voice, or the voices of others around us.

God's voice...as soft as a gentle breeze, as powerful as gale force winds. God's voice...speaking through scripture, or a wise friend, or maybe someone we might disagree with at first. We often cannot hear God's voice because we have stopped listening for it or because of the cacophony of other voices that surround us. I can't even begin to imagine what the voices surrounding Pastor Rinkart must have been like: screaming, wailing, pleading, angry, hopeless, begging, and painful voices, mixed in with the sounds of the war going on around him. We, too, know what some of these voices sound like. Perhaps our own voice has been mixed in with them.

I'm convinced that Pastor Rinkart was able to survive and handle what he was called to do because he took time to tune into God's voice which gave him the strength, patience, courage, and faith to carry on in the midst of the turbulence. Because he did, he was able to pen the words to one of our most beloved hymns, sung for over 300 years: "Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices."

I know how hard it is to be thankful when we look at the current state of the world, our churches, and even our own lives. But there is a voice, to guide, empower, and comfort us as we journey through these turbulent days. A voice that reminds us, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Nicholas J. Be...



On the cover: This beautiful work of art graces the wall of the sanctuary at the New Carlisle Church of the Brethren. It sprang from an idea that Andrew Wright had while he was pastor at New Carlisle and became a reality thanks to Allen Wagner. It represents the different circles, or communities, that each person comes into contact with — those we live in, the church we go to, the people we work with or go to school with, etc. While each individual has several different groups/circles they belong to, that combination of different circles is what makes up the community as a whole.

Allen designed, cut, and arranged all of the individual pieces within the final piece, taking approximately 35 to 40 hours. It contains ten different types of wood including: western red cedar, lacewood, zebra wood, padauk, and maple.

How can you all be together with such differing views?

by Tracy Knechel-Sturgis

“How can you all be together with such differing views?” Kevin marveled. He did not expect to find us together if we were not together on issues.

It was June 26, 2022, two days after the US Supreme Court had overturned the landmark cases *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which held that women have the constitutional right to seek pre-viability abortions. Kevin lived ten minutes from Lower Miami COB and was commissioned by the New York Times to report on the reactions from the people in the pews.

Kevin had been kind enough to contact us ahead of time, instead of surprising us on a Sunday morning with his questions and a photographer. We informed the Adult Sunday School class that we would be receiving a visit from a reporter who wanted to gather our thoughts and reactions to the court decision and how we would respond as a church.

Kevin assumed he would only hear voices from one end of the spectrum at this rainbow-flag-flying church. He originally planned to visit a second, more conservative church to find additional opinions. After spending time with us, though, his plans changed. He spent the rest of the morning at Lower Miami.

For our part, we also made assumptions. What would an outside, unknown presence find and report about us? Surely this uncertainty was something to be avoided. The feeling of caution, of wanting to protect the sacredness of

what we had made together, was alive that morning. “We could just not let him in or block the door,” several sweetly protective, reporter-leery men of the congregation half joked to me as I entered the building that morning.

“This is exactly why we are here,” I assured them. “All we have to do is be ourselves.” And we were.

Kevin completed several interviews with willing members. Some of their comments, which contained greatly differing views surrounding abortion, were reported in his article later that night.

Before worship began, Kevin circled back around to check in with me. “You’ve got a secret sauce here that everyone is going to want,” he said with an amazement that brought me both surprise and affirmation. We were just being who we were with our *peacefully, simply, together* ways. I sometimes forget how radical that is: meeting together for prayer and discernment; listening to and valuing each person’s words; and building relationships over time to create a safe and supported space.

Kevin saw us in our Brethren way of being, immersed in the process of figuring out how to follow the teachings and life of Jesus on a daily and weekly basis. He had come for a statement, a specific action perhaps. But he left with an invitation into a community grounded in a life of faith, worship, and service together. It is not scripted by political rhetoric and agenda, but lived in shared conversation with scripture and the Holy Spirit. “Nice to know progressive and spirituality can co-exist,” Kevin had texted to me during the week following the article. “I may attend sometime in a non-reporter capacity.”

While not sought, Kevin’s visit sparked us to ask ourselves what we, as a Brethren congregation and denomination, believe. So, in the fall, we began using *A Dunker Guide to Brethren Beliefs* to bring people (newer and longtime Brethren) together for further conversations. We can all use a nudge sometimes.



Team Spirit

by Tom Menke

The Church has continually evolved over the past 2,000 years. Technology and COVID have accelerated changes; some of which have not been positive. My purpose in this article is to describe the next phase of Oakland's evolution as a congregation.

Oakland's recent historical structure used a top-down, pastor-led approach to leadership. Over the past 160 years, many ministers have served Oakland. But Oakland's essence has been the congregants who daily follow Jesus' example.

This diagram illustrates how we will function going forward. It is based on the mission statement we adopted in 1997: *Continue the work of Jesus. Love God. Love people. Celebrate Life. PASS IT AROUND!* We are a congregation who continues the work of Jesus by serving others.

As you add the different areas of our mission statement to the diagram and include the teams and persons serving in those areas, the result is circular. Jesus is rightfully at the center; no one else. No individual or committee is more important than another. We work together to serve others as Jesus would want. And while each person and team functions within a ministry circle, we are all connected – an integral part of the "priesthood of all believers."

Our new way forward includes an intentional, ministry-team approach. Rather than rely on one person to fulfill the expectations of a lead pastor, the yoke is shared. The ministry team is comprised of five persons who share pastoral duties: individuals whose gifts are to lead worship and inspire us with the spoken word to continue Jesus' work. The coordinator makes sure that everything works together to provide the care and inspiration that the congregation needs. This should provide better congregational care and different perspectives, as well as buffer changes as persons retire or leave this ministry. Our pastoral budget will be shared amongst ministry team members as needed rather than designated to one person.

We also intend to seek and encourage new persons into this special part of ministry. Perhaps others who have a passion for ministry will be attracted to join the team without the burden of a full-time commitment. Guest ministers will certainly be part of the plan. This structure and process will continue to evolve. We will adjust as we learn more about our needs and revise past ways of doing things. It will take focus and patience, along with much prayer, as we start this journey together into the future of Oakland.



A Simple Solution

by Nancy Heishman

Complex factors are contributing to the current shortage of pastors in many denominations. Stresses experienced during the ongoing pandemic, a sense of isolation and loneliness in ministry, and intense political divisions causing increasing polarization in society and the church are some of the reasons offered. Congregations struggle to support their pastors financially and maintain a healthy partnership as they navigate the troubled waters together. So how can congregations find pastoral leadership in a time of transition? It is crucial that congregations develop a deep culture of calling that not only enriches their life together but blesses others beyond their local setting. . . one that understands that the priesthood of all believers is the foundation that supports a shared congregational life together where all gifts are welcomed.

Ministers: Everyone!

by Jan Futrell

In my experience, Lower Miami Church of the Brethren has always believed what Sunday bulletins say: “Ministers: Everyone.” Lay and seminary-educated members shared messages when our half-time pastor, Nan Erbaugh, had a Sunday off. In September 2021, after Pastor Nan retired, Tracy Sturgis became our interim pastor, contracted for ten hours per week. Pastor Tracy’s focuses are worship and participating in the Leadership Team process, so the congregation’s leaders have had to step up in new ways.

We increased the custom of calling on members to share Sunday messages. We voted new members onto the Leadership Team, and Kathryn Reynolds became its chair and general organizer. We strengthened ministry teams and created a Worship Team to work with Pastor Tracy. Our Deacon Chair, Gale Stephenson, picked up many administrative duties that Pastor Nan once performed. Other unfinished business, such as the replacement of the church’s roof, found their way from the pastor’s work list to the Steward’s. In this very small congregation (twenty-five people present on a typical Sunday), everyone who is able participates in some way in the church’s ministry.

After a year of finding our way, we are at a point of decision. We are not just continuing previous customs and habitual tasks. Instead, the Leadership Team is



listing all that has needed doing. Then, we will take that list to our January Council Meeting and invite congregation members to give feedback about priorities for pastoral care, outreach ministries, worship, facilities, and fellowship. We will call out the gifts of each as we consider a way forward.

Our Loving God provides all that we need, often in surprising ways. From that abundance, our diverse congregation goes forward together—one step at a time—with hope and joy.

to a Complex Crisis

Three factors can encourage a calling culture in your congregation:

- Intentional calling – Congregations can devote a portion of every yearly congregational meeting to inviting attendees to prayerfully and confidentially discern the names of persons in their midst in whom they see gifts for ministry. Those names can then be given to the trusted group of leaders in the body who discern those who should receive an invitation to consider the set-apart ministry. Regularly including a time of intentional communal discernment in a congregation’s shared life begins to instill in the church family an understanding that God is constantly calling forth leadership for ministry.
- Acceptance and affirmation – Congregations that wish to encourage calling need to be encouraging and supportive of persons who are trying out gifts for

service and ministry. A spirit of generous hospitality is key as persons, especially youth and young adults, try preaching, worship leading, service, and other new tasks.

- Support – Districts that devote financial resources toward training and educational opportunities support those sensing a call. In their roles, district executive ministers and ministry commissions offer discerning persons a level of support that invites a rich partnership with congregations in affirming and discerning the call to the set-apart ministry.

For stories of congregations working at creating a culture of calling, visit www.brethren.org/officeofministry/shared-ministry-model.

May we heed God’s invitation to be intentional, encouraging, and creative in the calling of persons to follow Jesus into the set-apart ministry!

Standing With People of Color

by Bruce Rosenberger

As Brethren we like to think of ourselves as “Jesus in the neighborhood” and yet when it comes to respecting the worth of people of other races, our record has been disappointing. Unfortunately, racial bias persists in our society and in our church.

There are so many ways in which the implicit bias in our society negatively affects people of color. White people are not aware of the frequency with which Black people are stopped for “driving while Black” - a frequent expression of racial profiling. Evidence is clear that people of color in the United States do not have the equal access to health care that White people do.

Within district, Brethren moms talk about their fears raising Brown children. Black Brethren parents talk about the need to tell their children, especially teen boys, how to interact with police officers (whether or not they have done anything wrong). People have been told that they were not welcome in a Brethren congregation because they have an interracial marriage. Black delegates to Brethren conferences have described feeling unwelcome or ignored. District pastors struggle to open the conversation about race in their resistant congregations. And several years ago at a district event, the word “black” was used in a drama in a way that would not attract the attention of a White person but was deeply offensive to people of color. Unfortunately, people in leadership were not sensitive to the racial offense in that drama.

The majority of the Brethren have grown up White and have no idea how it feels to be racially profiled – to be judged solely on the color of one’s skin. White members report that they never knew Black people when they were growing up and are either unaware of a problem (and don’t want to discuss it) or are just now beginning to deal with their fear-driven

impressions. Many Brethren do not recognize that systemic racism is present in our society and that it affects our church at every level.

The Southern Ohio and Kentucky District of the Church of the Brethren came before the 2022 Annual Conference with a call for the Church of the Brethren to focus attention on the systemic racism and implicit racial bias that continues to exist in church and society. Racism was not a new topic for the Annual Conference which had adopted previous statements on that concern. Discussions at the 2022 Conference recognized that adding one more statement would not solve the concern around racism. So with much prayer and discussion the Annual Conference adopted the concerns of the query “Standing with People of Color” and called for a two-year study/action process.

The Annual Conference asked our district, in cooperation with On Earth Peace, “to develop various materials for congregational, district, and denominational use.” During the next two years, the study/action committee will seek to build **connections** among people who are interested in and/or working for racial justice. We will encourage the study of Jesus’ teachings and how they apply to our relationships. We will encourage the church to take action to address specific problems of racial injustice.

While the Standing with People of Color committee continues to do its work, the churches of our district are asked to consider their congregation’s attitudes and responses to people of color in their midst.

We challenge you to consider these two questions:

1. How would you feel and act if you were a parent in one of the situations mentioned at the beginning of this article?
2. In the light of the implicit racial bias in our society, what does the Gospel call us to do?

As we continue the two-year study/action process, the Standing With People of Color committee seeks your prayers and invites comments and suggestions to be submitted at StandingWithPeopleOfColor@brethren.org.



God Has You in His Hands

by Larry Lutz

“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”
—John 10:28 (NIV)

Life can have its difficult moments. We wonder why we are having such a hard time. But in those times, others see our faith and how we handle the things the world throws at us. They notice when we hold onto Jesus, who has us in His hands. (John 10:28) Whatever comes against us, whether it is monetary loss, losing a loved one, sickness, etc., we can know Jesus has us and will never let us go. I have personally had my share of troubles. I have been fighting different illnesses most of my life, partially from an autoimmune disease that attacks me from within. I have had several surgeries and struggles along the way. But I know the Lord has me, and I will be able to see it through. (John 14:1-3) (Romans 8:14-21)

We are not destined to be in a world of difficulties forever. We have hope and peace in knowing we belong to God because of Jesus’ pain and suffering on the cross. We can also know that challenging times will strengthen us and help us better see the wonders of faith in our Savior. All our difficulties and trials will have a benefit because our faith grows best when it is tested, and we believe the Lord has us in His hands. (Romans 8:28-30) We need to keep recalling and trusting the Word of God, because that is the only lasting, perfect solution that we have against our hard times. We have the promise that God will see us through the most troubling times.

The Lord truly has us in His hands and we need to keep turning to Him, even when we don’t understand how or why some things come into our lives. We need to keep prayed-up and pour out our hearts to Him, all the while giving Him praise, for He first suffered and died for us. The Lord has you and loves you. The Lord knows your concerns and heartaches. He will never let you go. There is comfort in that. We can hold onto the one that holds onto us. He is there for us. (Philippians 4:7, 4:12-13)



Many people do not have what we have in Jesus. They don’t know what to do, so they often turn to bad habits and harmful products like alcohol and drugs. They lash out in anger because they have no peace. But when they see you living out being held in the hands of your Savior and overcoming suffering, they may wonder how you are doing it.

Part of overcoming these things comes from turning our focus from ourselves to others. Our faith should lead us to tell others the good news that they may have not heard or understood. We not only help them by giving them the reasons for our joy in the midst of troubles, but we help ourselves remember who holds us. We must give others the answer to conquering the things of this world through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. May we do so with a glad heart! Amen. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)

There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. —Ephesians 4: 4-6 NRSV

The gifts that [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ. —Ephesians 4: 11-12 NRSV

What does it look like to be one body of Christ, a priesthood of all believers?

We are in this journey together

Praying for your family of faith

Serve with your pastor

Comfort those who suffer loss

Continuing the work of Jesus

CARE FOR THE SHEEP AS YOU FEND OFF THE WOLVES

Go forth grounded in a life of faith

Hope and peace knowing we belong to God

Call out the gifts of each

Together

Together is a bi-annual publication of the Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren. Thank you to all who have contributed to this publication. Submissions of original artwork, poetry, as well as stories of ways we work together, or ways your church fulfills our mission of being Jesus' hands and feet in your community are always welcome. All submissions are subject to approval and editing by the Together editorial staff. Authors of original articles will be given the opportunity to preview before article is publishes. The theme of our next issue is "Grow with a growth that is of God".

If you would like to receive this publication, send mailing information to P O Box 785 Greenville, OH 45331, or email to sodcob@brethren.org. Although the publication is being mailed free of charge, donations to help cover expenses are welcome and can be made to the District at PO Box 785 Greenville, OH 45331.

Editorial staff: Carrie Drees, Mary Boone, Joanna Erbaugh, Wendy Erbaugh, Karen Garrett, Jan Futrell, and Ted Foster. Design by Debbie Noffsinger Design.