

Together

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Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren

...and God breathed life

Breathing in the Beloved

Breathing is something we all do, but with varying degrees of awareness. In our District Conference theme, “Breathing in” means taking within ourselves, being surrounded by, and breathing among. “The Beloved” means you and me, the Spirit of God and the body of Christ, the ones I agree with and the ones that make my body tense. *BELOVED* is also the acronym for our process of having critical Christian conversations about racial justice within our district.

We were all given breath from the Creator upon our arrival: *Then the LORD God formed a human from the dust of the ground and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being* (Genesis 2:7). We also have the powerful breath from Jesus spoken of in John 20:22: *He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* Are we truly able to receive such vital gifts when our breathing is shallow, rushed, or thoughtless?

I began recognizing the importance of breath when I surveyed the points of disconnection and discomfort in my own life. I began to see how avoiding conflict meant I was holding my breath and bracing my body. And I began to learn the many ways I needed to bravely breathe through the pain of being human instead of freezing or fleeing in fear.

There have been times at Annual Conference when I could feel my muscles tighten, my body and mind becoming uncomfortable as an idea counter to my own was expressed. When this happened, I was closed off from learning or making any kind of meaningful connection. As a result, I usually only talked to people with whom I was already comfortable or people who expressed themselves in a way that I could understand and recognize as (of course) a better way of believing or living.

This is not what Jesus calls us to do, but fear interrupts the flow of our breath. It takes our higher brain functions offline. Fast, racing breath creates a survival response which activates us for protection. It hijacks our more rational capabilities. Slower, controlled breath sends the message to our body that we are safe and that things are okay.

We can learn to control and focus our breathing, and it is even more powerful when we do this together. Think of the energy vibrating within the room when a whole congregation sings a favorite hymn. Singing together is breathing together. Both increase the chances of being on the same wavelength.

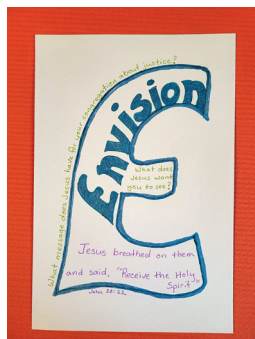
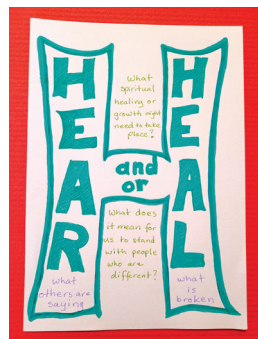
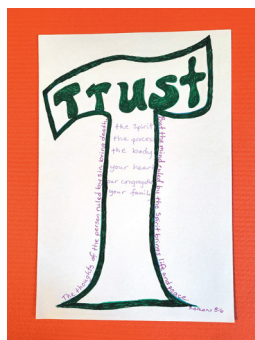
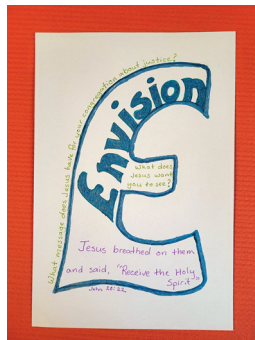
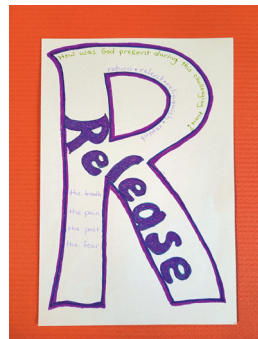
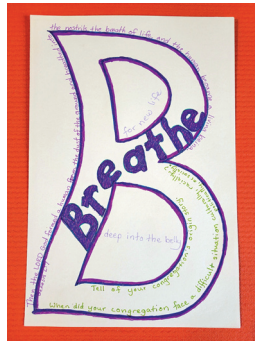
Breath is the bridge from the body to the brain. It is critical to cross this bridge, because it creates a pause that shifts us into a greater openness to receive what God intends. This is why taking a breath is essential during challenging interactions. We need this tool amid the *BELOVED* conversations, with people we may or may not know and like, as we seek the mind of Christ.

As your district moderator for 2024, I invite us to breathe together as we take part in conversations large and small. May we allow ourselves to be carried through these days with the buoyancy of the beloved breath in and among us.

—Tracy Knechel Sturgis, District Moderator



BREATHE With Intention



Start this meditation by noticing your breath as it moves into your body. Begin with **B**.

With each inhale, say the word “**Breathe**” to yourself. Focus on the rising and expansion of your belly. Hear this word in your mind as a message from the Creator who gave you your first breath. Hear this word as an imperative from the Redeemer who sent you out. Hear this word as a blessing from the Holy Spirit who accompanies you in this very moment of awareness.

When you are ready, add the word “**Release**” on the exhale. Hear these words follow one another, **Breathe – Release**, as your conscious mind synchronizes with your physical cycle of breathing. Think of what you may need to let go of, and see it being pushed out with each exhale. This may be as far as you need to go for now, but if you are ready, continue on to **E**.

Now, on the inhale, say the word “**Envision**” as an invitation to visualize a best possible outcome for your life right now. Stay focused on inhaling this **E** until a clear picture is formed in your mind’s eye of what you would like to see unfold. A smile may pull up the corners of your mouth as an image becomes clear.

With a clear image, add the **A** for “**Act**.” What action will you take? Stay with the **E** and the **A**, the call to **Envision** and to **Act**, the inhale and the exhale, until you feel your resolve strengthen in the seeing and the doing. You may act now, or continue to visualize and focus on the breath. Return to **B** and **R** as needed.

Following the action, inhale the **T** for “**Trust**.” Trust that the Spirit of Life is with you now. Trust your choice of word or action. Trust that you are doing your best and that God will be with you whatever happens. Trust that the Spirit is working in others, too. Trust that the ongoing process of grace will redeem what most needs resuscitation.

You have a choice with **H**. Breathing in **Trust**, it may be time to remind yourself to truly “**Hear**” what feedback God or another person has for you. Or, breathing out “**Heal**” may be the more important message for your journey with the breath today. Open yourself to **Trust – Hear** or to **Trust – Heal**. Inhale – Exhale.

The last **E** is the ever-important “**Evolve**.” What needs to evolve in your life at this time? What changes or choices do you need to make? Take a complete cycle of inhaling and exhaling on the word **Evolve**, waiting expectantly, for we are made to learn and grow in the breath of God.

Return to the previous sets of letters: **B-R**, **E-A**, **T-H**, as well as **E**, as the Spirit leads.

May peace surround you as the breath of God sustains you.

From Interim to Called Part-time Pastor

by Sandra Jenkins

I was invited to come on board as the interim pastor of the Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren at the tail end of COVID. Health and safety restrictions were in place, and the Beaver Creek family of faith was navigating through the uncertainty that many churches faced at that time. Despite the restrictions that COVID introduced, the folks at Beaver Creek were determined and stayed the course. They journeyed through the pandemic led by the example of Christ and a deep concern for others.

The Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren learned a lot emerging out of COVID. Some things at Beaver Creek remained the same, but many had changed. The congregation learned to do church in new ways. Since that time, new ideas for worship and fellowship have come to fruition, and the message of Christ Jesus continues.

After serving as the interim pastor for two years, my husband Chris and I felt that Beaver Creek was a home to us. I followed God's call to place my pastoral profile for consideration. In November 2023, I was installed as their part-time Pastor. I had retired from teaching public school the previous August and I knew I could fully focus on the ministry Beaver Creek expected.

I continue to be excited and focused working with the Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren. We have introduced new ways to strengthen our partnership with Evergreen Daycare Center, housed in our church building. They offer childcare to over 100 hundred families in our community. We also support a scouting program that has partnered with the church for over fifty years and uses our buildings and property for their activities. Strengthening these relationships is vital in the church's

mission to be a light to the community and continue our Brethren commitment to service. I give thanks to God for leading me to this chapter in my ministry and to this church family. I look forward to the future: walking with this family of faith in the name of Jesus Christ.



Selling Our Property, NOT Disbanding

A story told by Cathy Clayton and Glen Phillips, compiled by Karen Garrett

In 1961, Trinity Church of the Brethren (Sidney OH), built a spacious building on four plus acres of land. As with many congregations, our membership has been declining, and the age and mobility of our people have made it difficult to care for the property. A few individuals bore the load, leaving them little or no time for personal spiritual growth.

Doing something with our building has been a topic of discussion since 2015. We faced two difficulties when considering the disposition of our building: reluctance to change and fear of the unknown. We considered selling the parsonage, selling some of the grounds, inviting another congregation to blend with us, and selling our building and buying or renting a smaller place. In 2019, the Shelby County YMCA, approached our leadership about purchasing part of our property. They eventually decided it would not meet their needs, but this experience led us to have more frequent and serious conversations about our building.

At the end of 2022, our pastor resigned and we realized that we needed to make decisions. What was God's call for us? For the 2023 Lenten season, leadership invited the congregation to pray daily for guidance. And the Holy Spirit was already working. During a conversation between member Dorothy Langdon and her neighbor, Pastor Harry Peterson, she discovered that his church was trying to find a solution to their own building situation. Thus began dialog and shared worship with the thought of combining congregations in the Trinity building. However, this did not work out, and we felt like we were back at square one.

Member Glen Phillips approached the YMCA about purchasing our entire property. They agreed, and we began discussions. Additional factors occurred that convinced the congregation we were being led to sell.



We lost revenue when the Sydney Co-op preschool, our long-time renter, closed. Two people in key leadership positions within the congregation resigned. And we considered the ongoing cost of utilities, insurance, building repairs, etc. At a congregational meeting, Steward chair Phil Miller asked, "Will our focus be about facilities or worship and witness?" His question and a song we sang one Sunday helped shape our vision. "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people."

By late fall, Cornerstone Church also expressed interest in purchasing the building. Now we had two interested parties with good Christian ministries. As we pondered the unknown, we realized that the funds from the sale of our building would help us fulfill Jesus' teaching to "Feed My sheep."

We ended up accepting the offer from Cornerstone Church. Hopefully, by the time you read this, they will be settling into their new home. We plan to worship as before, but in a facility that is owned and maintained by someone else; we are negotiating to use the chapel at a local retirement community for that purpose. Along our journey, we have discerned, prayed, listened, and shared. We searched for solutions. We even held a special worship service for acknowledging sadness, grief, and dreams. Now, with God's leading, we look forward to new opportunities to serve Him.

Let's Talk

by Christy Schaub

Standing with People of Color

I grew up in Tipp City, Ohio, attending the Potsdam Church of the Brethren. I had very few interactions with people of color until I attended Miami University. Even there I recall only a few brief conversations in class with one African-American woman.

During my first job in Human Resources at a large hospital in Dayton I began having regular interactions with people of color. One day, while discussing a job applicant with an African-American supervisor, I said that I didn't look at a person's color when interviewing them. She emphatically responded: "I want you to see my color. I want you to see me!" I was taken aback. For many years after that, I avoided conversations about race and racial justice.

For many of us, talking about race is not part of our everyday life. If, like me, you grew up in a mostly white community, you may think that there isn't a need to talk about these things. Furthermore, TV or social media "talk" about race is often a shouting match and that's not how I want to engage.

After George Floyd's murder and the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, things changed for me. Closer to home, formal discussions about inviting a start-up Congolese church to share our Kettering facility felt like building a Tower of Babel. We spoke past one another, never bringing up concerns about race. Instead, we said things like, "Their music might be too loud and disruptive." I offered a few reasons why we could benefit from sharing our building, but never engaged in discussions of the stereotypes our concerns reflected. I regret not speaking up or asking deeper questions about our racial and cultural differences. Shortly after, I joined the Southern Ohio/Kentucky District racial justice team and started my journey to become more comfortable talking about racial justice.

The racial justice team wrestles with the following questions: How do we, as Brethren, engage in mutually respectful conversations about race and racial justice? And how shall we encourage others to also engage in these conversations? Our District brought a query to the 2022 Annual Conference, asking what it would take, in practice, for the Church of the Brethren to stand with people of color. The Conference mandated a two-year,

denomination-wide study/action process to help us address this question together.

The process has been extended to 2025. At the 2023 Annual Conference in Cincinnati, we formally launched the 7 Prompts and the BELOVED model which outlines best practices for having helpful and healthy conversations about sensitive or difficult topics such as race. In brief, here is what each letter of BELOVED signifies:

Before You Share

Remind yourself of the purpose of the activity and contemplate your responses.

Empathize

Empathize with others and oneself.

Listen

Listen from your heart to one another.

Offer Your Perspective

Speak only for yourself and about your own unique experience.

Visualize

Visualize and share what you might do differently as a result of this conversation.

Engage

Actively participate. Remind yourself to "Step Back" or "Step Up" as is helpful.

Discover and Discern

Reflect on your own learning. Discern your own pathway about where else you might engage in sharing or moving forward with these justice issues.

In a BELOVED community, differences are valued and celebrated. We are one body with many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12). We believe everyone is invaluable and irreplaceable. When everyone is valued, everyone will feel a sense of belonging and different expressions will be a natural part of who we are.

The goals of Standing with People of Color (SWPOC) are for the BELOVED model to cultivate concern, commitment and compassion; to allow our hearts and minds to be touched by the experiences of others; and to move us one step closer to being part of a BELOVED community. With each helpful conversation about race in the church, we realize that racial justice is God's healing work for the church, our nation, and the world.

Let's talk. Visit www.brethren.org/swpoc

The 7 Prompts and BELOVED model is available as a download on that page.

Or scan the QR code to visit our website



Breath of Life

by Paula Bowser

They say doctors used to hold a newborn by the foot
and deliver a slap to bring the first breath.

Before we had our little plastic bulbs
to suck away phlegm and cawl,
the midwives must have put their mouths to the babe
to free the airways – a critical intervention as
all waited breathlessly for the borning cry.

We were *all* that helpless – lumps of lifeless clay,
if Genesis is to be believed,
when the Divine Midwife knelt
in the mud to put her mouth on ours
that the Breath of Life might flow
from Her Body into ours.

There is, to be sure, the Mighty Rushing Wind
crashing through the Upper Room,
and the torrential tempests from the
four corners of the earth
that raised the dry bones
from the desert floor to form an army. Yes!
Breath may be made manifest as gale-force gusts,
it's true.

But re-mem-ber this too:
after Jesus breathed His last,
there came what some have called
the Soft Pentecost,
wherein the Lord spoke Peace to the disciples,
then sent them into the world to deal with sin.

But he did not send them in 'til he breathed on them.
How profound and profane;
how intimate and insane!
Just... how? Was it in a small circle, or one by one?
(When I try to picture such mysteries, I am stymied.)

However it happened, we know this:
Our Redeemer's Breath is the Divine Spirit:
the same Essence
Hildegard of Bingen called *viriditas*, that sacred sap
which enlivens and nourishes every green thing.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

It permeates the heavens, too, which are full of
God's glory: the Force infused in every earthly atom,
and Adam
and Eve, and *all* of us!

We require that Gift,
because the Breath of Life feeds every vibrating cell,
and allows for healing and feeling; growth and grace.

We tend to ignore the quiet fall and rise;
the thrumming pulse; the singing sighs.

Unless we pay attention, we don't know
that it's even happening, but it is....
in you
in me
relentlessly. Breath is imperceptible,
except to those who listen and cherish.

If we do not attend to it, we'll soon be like Samson
sleeping in Delilah's lap. He did not know
that the Breath of God had departed from him.

The mystics say that the very name of the Holy One
is a stand in for breath – a Word
that even sounds like *we* sound when we
inhale and exhale.

If that is so, we cannot, in fact, breathe without
without worshiping, without
celebrating the Presence of our Living God.

It's not on ivory cardstock in sable calligraphy,
but each day we are invited to attend
to the Breath of Life;
to shut off all actions and distractions,
and be present to our own bodies.

What stops the breath? An enemy's approach?
A friend's reproach? We tend to those, don't we?
Is it in that moment when we watch
as a child is pulled from the rubble,
or see the sweat and blood of sacrificial love?
Is it when we smell a rose, or see a snake, or feel fire?
or drink in the song of a silken choir?

Like the Queen of Sheba before the Wisdom
that was embodied in Solomon,
we might ask each night
What terrible or beautiful thing made me breathless?
Was it a radiant face or a prophetic word,
a loving caress or a story ringing with truth?

And what quickens our breath? Fear?
The thought of death? What makes it return,
and burn in us again? A friend?

Why will we be panting when playing Hide and Seek,
when the Hunter comes clamoring, close at hand?
We can hardly stifle the sound
as we gulp the air, pulse pounding.
Do we not, in fact, *want* to be found?

How bles't are we to be able to breathe,
and in the ebb and flow, to *know*
that we've already been found and surrounded,
and to be at peace.



and God breathed life

...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” (Gen 2:7)

We often take our breathing for granted, unless some health issue arises and we need help with this fundamental function of life. Most of us just assume that we are going to take our next breath, and our next, and so on. We don't consider it anything special, much less miraculous. But that's exactly what it is: a miracle. Ask someone with asthma, COPD, or sleep apnea exactly how miraculous the next breath is!

Even if we do not suffer from such challenges, we should consider the verse from above. We are lifeless until the Almighty God breathes into our bodies the first time. It happened to Adam, and it happens again and again each time a baby is born and God breathes life into them. As I write this, we are expecting a new granddaughter and we will rejoice when God breathes His first breath into her tiny body.

If our first breath comes from God, then each breath thereafter is holy. Does knowing that God's own breath and image is inside us change the way we speak and act? If our first inhaled breath comes from God, then each exhaled breath should be holy, blessing everyone and everything around us.

As we reflect on our District Conference theme for this year, “Breathing in the Beloved,” let us remember that each breath is a miracle and each breath is holy. Each of us is a holy, beloved being with God's own breath and image inside us.

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 an article is published.

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Editorial staff: Ted Foster, Mary Boone, Karen Garrett, Jan Futrell, Wendy Erbaugh, and Joanna Erbaugh
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