

**STANDING COMMITTEE SPECIAL ITEM #10 (a)  
"PRE-COMMITTEE" COMMITTEE REPORT FOR  
A STUDY OF THE NAME OF THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

**INTRODUCTION**

As the world moves toward the 21st century the Church of the Brethren finds itself coming to grips with a question put to Alexander Mack nearly 300 years ago, "And how shall your members be recognized?" In the early part of the 18th century in small town Germany, it was enough for Mack to answer, "They shall be recognized by the manner of their living." In today's world of mass marketing, instant communication, pluralism, and cross-cultural contact, names and symbols convey the identity of a community of believers.

The question is being raised as to whether the word "Brethren" accurately and helpfully reflects the identity and mission of our denomination in today's world. In contemporary society, "brethren" is often understood as the old-fashioned term for a group of men, only, especially a religious order of men.

In response to concerns raised by members of congregations across the denomination, the 1992 Standing Committee agreed to authorize a study "for the purpose of determining if the name of the Church of the Brethren should be considered for change." The committee was charged with discerning "whether or not this is the right time to begin conversation about studying a change in the name of the Church of the Brethren."

**COMMITTEE WORK**

The committee reflected on the significance of names and what a name means in terms of identity and mission for persons and groups.

The Committee considered the way names are used in scripture, especially the giving of a new name for a new calling and mission (e.g. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Paul).

The Committee studied historical and archival documents and concluded that present concerns and questions are similar to those facing the church from the mid-1800's until the 1908 change in name from "German Baptist Brethren" to "Church of the Brethren."

The Committee was especially interested in the fact that the Church of the Brethren missions outside of North America have taken other names because "Church of the Brethren" does not translate well into the language of the country. For example, in China, "Church of the Brethren" became the "Church of Friendly Love." In Nigeria, Ekklesiyar 'Yanuwa a Nigeria" translates literally as "Church of Children of the same parents in Nigeria." Further we are advised by our Korean Brethren that the name Church of the Brethren, when translated into Korean is easily confused with a non-Christian cult in Korea. In Latin America our name is awkward to use because it translates "church of the brothers" and explanation is needed to affirm that

"sisters" are also included in the community of faith. No matter how familiar or beloved our name may be within the "home base" of our church family, many on the cutting edge of evangelism and mission in the US and around the world are experiencing the name Church of the Brethren as an obstacle to the spreading of the gospel.

The committee is keenly aware of the deep feelings involved in any discussion of a church name. We are standing on the holy ground of heritage and cherished values as the church struggles with this issue. We are encouraged by these two realizations.

1. Even as God has called God's people by name through the millennia, God knows and is calling our name. Perhaps we will recognize it as familiar, perhaps not. But we believe we are called by a name even as Israel was.
2. The spiritual descendants of the Schwarzenau baptism have been at this point possible name change before. Although Alexander Mack's followers took no name for themselves, throughout history we have been known as Neue Taufers (New Baptists), Fraternity of German Baptists, German Baptist Brethren, and Church of the Brethren, as well as many variations of "Dunker." Twenty years before the official name change of 1908, thirteen queries came to Annual Meeting dealing with "agitation throughout the Brotherhood in regard to changing the name of the church." (German Baptist Brethren, *Full Report of the Proceedings of the Brethren's Annual Meeting*, North Manchester, Ind., 1888, p. 64.) No matter what the outcome of the present conversation, we feel a kinship with our ancestors in the faith as we seek together the mind of Christ in this matter.

## **COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS**

After study, discussion and prayer, and having received many communications from persons throughout the denomination, the Committee concludes that the conversation about the name and identity of the church has already begun. The question is whether or nor some part of the church body will facilitate that conversation and guide it in helpful and upbuilding ways.

We recommend that Standing Committee initiate a process for giving guidance to a denomination-wide discussion of the church's identity and mission and consideration of what name might reflect both who we are and who we are called to be in today's world. Such a process would help us listen to many voices in Christian love, openness, and kindness, forbearing one another as brother and sisters in Christ. We do not assume that a new name would result-only that the denomination would consider issues reflected in the name by which it is known.

Issues for the conversation include:

- Identity-Who we are and how do we want to be known?
- Mission-What do we stand for and how do we intend to live out our calling?
- Inclusiveness-What words reflect who we are called to include in the Body of Christ?

- Continuity-What is the best way to preserve and build on the legacy of our faith ancestors?
- Name recognition-How do we create name recognition where we are not known? How do we retain name recognition in areas where we are known and respected for missions and service?
- Evangelism and church growth-What are leaders in the field telling us about the importance of a church name in the work of spreading the gospel?
- Interpretation in ecumenical and secular world-How does a discussion of our name impact other descendants of the Schwarzenau baptism and other ecumenical partners and agencies?
- Linguistics-How is a name translated and understood in languages other than English?
- Covenant-How do we hold one another in love and fellowship in the face of disagreement?

The conversation could be carried out in many forms, e.g.

- A special issue of Brethren Life and Thought
- A dialog column in the Messenger
- Agenda item for Church of the Brethren agencies
- Development of exercises for group use, focusing on name and identity
- Curriculum
- Bible study opportunities
- Inclusion in conference programs, e.g. District, Annual, Youth, Young Adult, Older Adult conferences
- Seeking counsel from partner churches in areas of Church of the Brethren mission, and other Schwarzenau groups
- Structured interviews with representatives of constituent groups

Possibilities for monitoring and facilitating these conversations include:

- Annual Conference officers
- Standing Committee

- Committee appointed to guide conversation
- Committee appointed to study the issue

The Committee recommends that Standing Committee develops a timeline for soliciting constituent response, for determining how long the conversation should continue, and for discerning the time to push for decision. If a change is to be made, an appropriate time for all implementation would be our tercentennial celebration in 2008. One possible scenario follows. (It may be that there is enough ferment in the denomination at the present time that it would be difficult to hold a constructive discussion now. We affirm the steps in this process regardless of which dates might be proposed.)

### **TIMELINE FOR CONSIDERING THE NAME OF THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

1970's-90's	Informal conversations taking place
1992	Standing Committee appoints a "Pre-Committee" to discern the issue
1993	Pre-Committee reports to Standing Committee Standing committee decides to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) terminate official consideration</li> <li>b) continue discussion at present level</li> <li>c) recommend action to Annual Conference</li> </ul> One possible action would be to form a three-year conversation committee. Its charge would be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) To provide a forum for members to listen to one another's concerns</li> <li>b) To distribute materials and solicit responses concerning church name</li> <li>c) To develop a system whereby districts can enable continuing conversation</li> </ul>
1996	If Conversation Committee was formed, Conversation Committee reports and Annual Conference decides to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) terminate official consideration.</li> <li>b) continue discussion at present level.</li> <li>c) form a two year study committee to consider information gathered and make further recommendations.</li> </ul>
1998	If Study Committee was formed, Study Committee brings recommendation and Annual Conference decides to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) terminate official consideration.</li> <li>b) continue discussion at present level.</li> <li>c) move toward name change by forming a committee to recommend new name.</li> </ul>
2000	If Name Committee was formed, Name Committee presents possibilities and Annual Conference chooses name: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) selecting a new name.</li> <li>b) reaffirming present name.</li> </ul>
2001	If a new name is chosen, process of changing official documents begins.
2005	Process of changing documents, signs, stationary, etc. continues.
2008	Celebration of a new name as part of a 300-year anniversary of Schwarzeneau baptism

Any proposed scenario should include ample time for conversation and discernment so that whether or not we arrive at a new name, we will have achieved a clearer sense of mission and

identity for the years ahead.

## **COSTS**

The Committee was also charged with "assessing emotional and economic costs of a study." We did not know how to quantify emotional costs. For some persons any discussion of change requires a high emotional cost. For other persons, living with the status quo requires an equally high level of frustration. The emotional costs of a study would be determined in part by how sensitively it would be handled. And as one members observed, "Emotional costs are great in not having dialog."

The economic costs of a study could be compared to previous long-term Annual Conference studies.

Several variables affect such costs:

1. Number of committee members
2. Geographic locations of committee members
3. Number of meetings of committee (travel, lodging, etc.)
4. Number of years committee meets
5. Copying and mailing costs of papers and documents
6. Telephone and fax charges for communication

Since 1986 the following Annual Conference committees have met and reported these costs:

Ethics in Ministry Relations	Sept. 91-Mar. 92	\$7,500
Black Americans	Sept. 90-Aug. 91	5,400
Denominational Structure Committees	1987-1989	13,300
	1989-1991	<u>18,900</u>
	total	32,200
Church and State	Sept. 87-Mar. 89	2,900
Inclusion of Ethnics	Sept. 87-Mar. 88	4,000
Christian Education Study	Sept. 87-Mar. 88	4,300
COB/India Fraternal Relations	Sept. 86-Mar. 88	6,500
World Mission Philosophy	Sept. 86-Mar. 88	11,800

-Duane Steiner, Annual Conference Manager, memo, April 27, 1993

The Committee was also asked to examine "the effect upon the church's relationships with groups such as the colleges, homes, ecumenical bodies and emerging churches." We

considered it premature to begin asking other groups about the possible effects of an issue that had not been officially opened "inside the family."

## CONCLUSION

The Committee understood its primary function to be that of providing a place in the structure for receiving comments from the church as persons and groups consider the identity, mission, and name of our denomination.

As we have received responses, it is clear that some segments of the church feel urgency about our name being a hindrance in terms of church growth and evangelism. Some see it as an issue of fairness, including women as well as men in the name of the church. Some see it as an issue of clarity, saying that in the language of today, our present name no longer reflects who we are as the name German Baptist no longer reflected the identity of the church at the turn of the 20th century. On the other hand, many say that the name Church of the Brethren has served us well in the past and continues to do so. Some say that "brethren" is an inclusive word and should be recognized as such. Some caution against a new name causing confusion in the areas of church growth and evangelism. There are those who feel that our denomination agenda is heavy and costly enough at present without adding further financial and psychological demands.

On both sides there is a call to affirm that all persons are included in our part of the Body of Christ. On both sides there is a call for the church to be strong in its witness and mission. On both sides there is the recognition that the denomination's name signals its calling. May God grant grace to us all to hear the name by which God calls and to extend that call to others.

Donna Ritchey Martin  
Harold Z. Bomberger  
Ruth Keller Gunn  
Shawn M. Replogle  
La Von Widegren Rupel

May 11, 1993

### Standing Committee Decision in 1993

**A STUDY OF THE NAME OF THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN:** Standing Committee received a report from its "pre-committee" committee that was to study the name of the Church. After a discussion of their report the Standing Committee took the following action:

**ADOPTED MOTION:** Standing Committee accepts the report of the Pre-Committee Committee and expressed appreciation and thanks to the Committee for the good work they have done in the study of the Name of the Church of the Brethren in recognizing and lifting up the concern and in planting seeds for the future. The Pre-Committee Committee is dismissed with the knowledge that the discussion will continue.