

## JAN ELLER INTERVIEWS

### 2008 ANNUAL CONFERENCE MODERATOR JIM BECKWITH

**JE:** Jim, as moderator, you have the privilege and responsibility to pick a theme for conference with the assistance of the planning committee. *"Surrendered to God, Transformed in Christ, Empowered by the Spirit"* was this year's theme, each outlined in a sermon. Did conference meet the expectations of the theme?

**JB:** The theme *"Surrendered to God, Transformed in Christ, Empowered by the Spirit"* was chosen several years ago by the 300th Anniversary Committee. I have found it very helpful for considering the faith and life of the first Brethren and for helping us to challenge one another to count the cost of following Jesus together. As I traveled, I found people grappling with the theme, particularly with regard to what it means to surrender to God and what kinds of transformation God wants to bring about in the body of Christ, the church.

The conference worship services, agency reports, many of the insight sessions, and conversations throughout our time together continued to wrestle with the theme. While we obviously have work yet to do in order to more fully surrender to God and discover the transformations that living in Christ will bring as the Spirit empowers us, I think it was an excellent theme for focusing our celebrations and our work together.

I am glad that things went so well at Annual Conference, everywhere I turned, people expressed their appreciation for the way in which worship, business, and activities had been led. It was very special to have the prayerful and loving support of sisters and brothers from across the spectrum of the denomination. I hope you found it helpful, too, both to celebrate the 300th Anniversary and also to launch the fourth century of the Brethren.

**JE:** During your sermon on Saturday evening, you outlined several conflicts between members in this denomination. I applaud your courage in naming the issue of homosexuality as well as your concise understanding of the issues on each side of the conflict. However, I personally wondered about your response that surrendering to God is part of answer. I think each position could state that it does surrender to God, within its understanding of what that means from its perspective. But we still experience the tension and the division. Can you say more about your understanding of how our relationship to God can help us move ahead?

**JB:** I agree, Jan, that people holding opposing opinions may well believe that they are already surrendering to God. Those who keep on working at surrendering to God, in my experience, continually learn that we have not been as surrendered as we thought we were, and often discover that others are more surrendered to God than we thought they were. I would wish for us to be more willing to listen to others, even as we seek the kind of respect that will enable others to listen to us. I hope we can learn to pray together for God to give us guidance, with the understanding that each of us is answerable to God, not to each other.

I think we may find ways to follow Jesus together when we quit insisting that people surrender to our point of view and instead invite people to ask God to help us all

understand what surrender to God requires of each of us. I hope this might mean that we could then allow our opponents to clarify how they are seeking to surrender to God, and that they will allow us to clarify how we are seeking to surrender to God. It is unnerving to realize that we may be led to surrender in differing ways. Our heritage has called us to discern God's Will through study of the scriptures, and that is what I invite us to pursue.

**JE: Several times this week I heard the word "unity" used. Can you address the difference between unity and conformity?**

JB: For me our unity as a body of Christ is to come from following Jesus together. Scriptures tell us that the body of Christ will have various parts with differing functions and that we are to respect one another's differing roles and gifts. We may well pull in opposing directions at times. Certain tensions are necessary for the body to function. If the body is moving to accomplish the work of Jesus in this world, those tensions will be productive and there will be unity of overall purpose, even in the midst of diverse purposes individually.

It seems to me that the only way for this unity to happen in the midst of our diversity is for each part of the body to more and more fully surrender to God, committed to follow Jesus, eager to obey our Lord's command that we love one another, so that the world can know that we are disciples of Jesus. If the mouth cares about the stomach, it will not eat just any old thing -- it will take into the stomach what the stomach can digest properly...although it may now and again give the stomach something new to try. The key, I think, is caring about how the other parts of the body are faring as we work at carrying out the work of Jesus together.

**JE: The CoB has historically been a peace church and prominent in justice issues. Recent decades have seen an erosion of support for peace stances. I have heard active belittling of peacemaking from the conference floor. Why do we tolerate such statements in a peace church, and why aren't more people as bothered by this as they are by the inclusion of GLBT persons in the life of the church?**

JB: Two responses come to mind: 1) Our peace convictions include the adage about not forcing others into our way of thinking and living, the forbearance side of peacemaking. In seeking the right to conscientiously object to violence, we want to respect those who conscientiously object to our objections. 2) For some time I have been concerned that we have not accented well enough why we are a peace church. I hear people argue that peacemaking is a part of "being Brethren," while others retort that they'd rather just be Christian and not worry about being "Brethren." My response is to try to clarify that we are a peace church (just as we also emphasize service ministries, simplicity, and community-building) for one simple reason: because it's what Jesus calls us to do...it's what the New Testament teaches.

As Bob Gross wrote in *On Earth Peace's* most recent newsletter: "the question is not, 'Are we a peace church?' but rather, 'Are we a church that follows Jesus?'" I believe that when people question or belittle our work for peace and justice, we must clearly articulate our calling to follow Jesus together and to put into practice what the New Testament commands. We must challenge our leaders and members to be well-grounded in the scriptures and to put its teachings into practice, so that we are eager to share God's grace with everyone, just as Jesus did, and to overcome evil with good. I believe it is crucial to our identity as a New Testament church that our witness and convictions arise from an

understanding that the entire New Testament is our rule of faith and practice, and we need to help each other wrestle with the parts of the New Testament that our personal perspectives tend to minimize.

**JE: I have read that a question to Standing Committee from the Program and Arrangements Committee includes the term "battleground" in describing the exhibit hall. However, I haven't seen overt violence or fights in the exhibits. I suspect that more of the violence is directed at the committee members, than at the general public. How is this "battle" played out? Say more about what the committee is thinking.**

JB: It is the application process for exhibit space which has become a battleground of strong passions as proponents and opponents of lgbt concerns pressure the Program & Arrangements Committee "to make a decision that might move the church in a partisan direction" as the P&AC request to Standing Committee for counsel says. The committee has received letters and phone calls and has engaged in conversations with people who have very strong, passionate opinions about what the committee should decide regarding the exhibit booth applications from the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests. Some have expressed themselves graciously. Some have communicated in ways that have made committee members feel battered. Some may not realize how their statements hit their readers/listeners.

The issue, however, is broader than the emotions of the conflict. It is also a question of the scope of responsibilities to which the Program & Arrangements Committee members have been called. Quoting again from P&AC's request for counsel from Standing Committee: "P&AC believes it is inappropriate and irresponsible for P&AC to make a decision that should be made by the church as a whole."

**JE: The Brethren west of the Mississippi are found in dispersed, mostly small congregations. Western Brethren have had a very hard time getting pastors to serve the churches. One answer given is that western Brethren just need to call more persons to the ministry, but just because they are called from the west, doesn't mean that they will come back out here when their training is completed. I'm not meaning to pick on you exclusively, but you are an example of someone who has spent most of your youth in the west and now serve churches in the east. Can you tell us anything to give us hope about the future of the Church of the Brethren west of the Mississippi?**

JB: My pastorates in PA and VA came as the result of our desire to be close to family. My parents had moved to New Windsor, MD, by the time I finished seminary and we were expecting our first child, so we wanted to locate in a pastorate near one set of grandparents. There were no openings close to my parents-in-law in CA, so we went east. Now our children and grandchildren are settled in PA and VA, and we want to be close to them. But my heart is stirred as I hear the pleas of congregations in the west for pastoral leadership. Similar pleas come from smaller congregations in the east as well, but I will address specifically the concerns of the west in response to your question.

Two things come to mind: 1) pastors are attracted to churches that are able to support them financially -- how might churches with greater financial resources assist those with fewer financial resources? Perhaps a strong "home missions" outreach and the

development of “sister congregation” relationships across the denomination might assist congregations within this country to grow. 2) leaders cluster around mission centers -- I remember how the Modesto congregation benefited from BVSers who came from churches in the eastern part of the US to work at the Church World Service Center in Modesto, bringing vitality to the young adult class, and some of them stayed to live in the community and work in the church. Can new mission and ministry centers become projects of the denomination?

In Nigeria (as a nation) each university graduate must give a year of service in a section of the country that is not his/her homeland, so that the many tribes will learn about each other and learn to live together in peace. This was begun after civil war had torn the country apart. BVS continues to make connections among us as well, but we can be more intentional to make connections between volunteers and congregations, to train volunteers to provide leadership in congregations near where they are placed, to host BVS projects near our congregations, and to send our youth into BVS.

**JE: Any final thoughts to share with us?**

JB: I'd just like to express my appreciation to each person who is earnestly and sincerely praying for the CoB to live and work together as a Body of Christ. Many yearn for the mutual love that reveals the true disciples of Jesus (John 13:35). Despite being an archaic word, the name “Brethren” (when it means sisterly and brotherly) describes well the respectful, caring way of living that Jesus calls us to model. I'm glad Jesus invites us to be family together as sons and daughters of the living God.

Shalom! May our life together become full and complete in the grace of God's peace.