



Annual Conference Reflections

Something Happened

by Bobbi Dykema

It's no secret that the Church of the Brethren as a denomination is deeply divided between progressives and conservatives. The setting aside of business for this year's Annual Conference in Greensboro, North Carolina, to continue to work through a Compelling Vision process together, was born out of a desire to reconnect conservatives and progressives alike to our deeper, core beliefs and values. And at least one table - Non-Delegate Table 9 - the Spirit moved and the process worked.

I had been asked to serve as a Supportive Communities Network chaplain for a block of time on Friday afternoon, so I proudly wore my rainbow lanyard throughout the conference. As table facilitator, I made an effort to arrive early, and the second person to arrive on Thursday afternoon was a conservative pastor from Virginia who immediately challenged me about my lanyard. I stayed calm. I asked questions and listened for the answers, including the words under the words. As a table, we worked through the Thursday afternoon questions amicably, but with an underlying current of suspicion.

Friday morning, this same man arrived second to the table and expressed his impatience with a process that didn't seem to be addressing the elephant in the room. I

shared that, as pastors, he and I both know that the argument is not always about what it's about, and I was inclined to trust our leaders and the process to help us get into the deeper stuff. He looked surprised, and thanked me for helping him understand. I asked if I could pray with him, and he declined, but he accepted a hug.

As our table worked through the questions together on Friday, something happened. Table members began to be willing to be vulnerable with one another, and share about our doubts and woundedness, as well as our convictions. As the questions moved into seeking ideas on where the deep passions of the Church of the Brethren meet the world's deep needs, the mood and energy at our table changed.

On Saturday morning, the conservative pastor sat down, looked around the table, and said, "I don't want to wash some random man's feet at Love Feast. I want to wash all of your feet." So we contacted Conference leadership and, with their blessing, proceeded as a table to the mixed-gender footwashing area and washed each other's feet. Bob knelt down and washed my feet, and I washed his - and we all washed every other table member's feet (they were very clean by the time we finished!) It was a gesture made with genuine love and appreciation. I didn't change Bob's mind, nor he mine, but we moved from a place of suspicion and hostility to a place of genuine love.

That's Holy Spirit.

That said, as time has passed, I'm not sure how lasting these changes might be, at least for me, and maybe that's not important. Maybe the important piece was for conservatives to see at least a few progressives as people and faithful Christians.

More AC Reflections on page 2

Introducing

Bobbi Dykema is currently serving as interim pastor at First Church of the Brethren in Springfield, Illinois.

She is also on the pastoral team of the Living Streamonline Church of the Brethren and is a

regular contributor to the *Brethren Life & Thought* blog. Bobbi is passionate about racial and gender justice, beauty and the arts, and reading scripture as a living document.



Index

Something Happened ... p 1, 2, 3

Introducing p 1

NOAC Reflections p 3

Book Review p 4

She Speaks in her

Own Voice p 4, 5, 6, 7

Annual Conference Reflections, con't.

By Anna Lisa Gross

In addition to powerful sermons and edifying music, I appreciated the Love Feast we shared. It came with challenges! But I'm glad leaders finally just did it, rather than saying "it's too complicated." These changing, chaotic, conflicted times in the church are a holy opportunity to try – what do we have to lose? Comfort, harmony, stability and apathy are already lost to us (thank God!). These are times to try. We never know the outcome, and ours is not to control the outcome - what a healthy place (yes, hard, too) for the church to be in.

Working and worshiping (and worshipfully working) in tables has been of great benefit to Brethren (another thing leaders finally just tried after hearing it would be "too complicated") but that doesn't mean that we'll do worshipful work well. We can practice agape when we meet at table, but we also hurt one

another. The holiness of the Love Feast many shared was marred by many people leaving their "home table" (I realize it was only home for a few days, but we do covenant with one another!) without explaining. I know some shared their concerns or schedule conflicts with their tablemates, but those who simply walked away left tablemates confused and often hurt.

Insight/equipping session slots are packed with amazing opportunities. I am inspired to see how much ministry is happening throughout the church and couldn't attend even 10% of what I longed to! I'm grateful that Womaen's Caucus has a luncheon slot (as problematic as the meal events are, with huge prices and staggering food waste).

Deanna Brown and Barbara West were brilliant, articulate, warm, provocative and dynamic.

They spoke with artist insight and skill about "The Gifts of Chaos" and we were captivated! We look forward to sharing the video with you soon.

I appreciate the concentration of Greensboro's convention center/hotel because we "ran into" each other constantly. But I would prefer a place with some green! I recall hearing that we "can't" go to a college campus, perhaps because the cost of the meal plan is too high? (As people might be required to sign up for three meals a day.) But there are things that do NOT work about the way we currently do AC (immense trash and no actual recycling, high costs, heavy AC, etc). For years I'd heard that "sharing Love Feast at Annual Conference is too complicated." Change always involves hiccups and downsides, but at least we could share new ones.

Annual Conference Reflections, con't.

By Sara E. Davis

Many thanks to all our wonderful supporters who make it possible for Womaen's Caucus to be present at Annual Conference.

Kathy Gingrich, Anna Lisa Gross and I were there to host our booth and our banquet. The booth featured a cardboard lectern where we posted a question for the day. Interested folks could comment on our outline or on a huge sheet of paper trailing off the table. Some questions that were asked were: How are we listening to people who have been expelled or have left the

church? and, What are your compelling vision questions?

I was a delegate for the La Verne Church; my table facilitator was part of the NYC leadership the year **Susan Boyer's** preaching was boycotted by conservatives. I pray that he turns around and holds the conservatives accountable for the harm they do with their exclusionary vision of Jesus. The table facilitator began with saying he knew he had the breadth of the church at our table with me there from La Verne and with a pastor from the BRF.

I was surprised when the BRF pastor warmed up to me a tiny bit when I pulled on my Franklin & Marshall sweatshirt (my son graduated from F&M which is located in Lancaster, PA). On our last day I asked him what he did for a living. He works in Lancaster designing work space for musicians in the rock and roll music industry where they can plan and practice big arena shows (thank you Taylor Swift). I had the feeling that there must be some openness in there if he at all tried to reconcile his

Continued on page 3

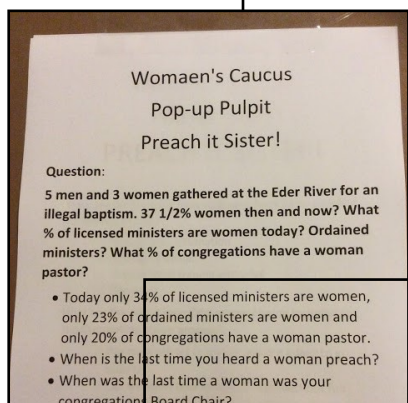
business relationships with his faith. So at one point I asked if he thought we (the church) could work together on all the ideas we had come up with as a table and set aside our differences on human sexuality. He said out loud, "I don't know" while shaking his head "no".

The range of personal stories at my table spanned from an out lesbian woman, to a woman who a fairly new to the church woman, to several male pastors and then the BRF male pastor. The theological range encompassed inclusion, to being

called out for perceived sin. However, despite these differences we still were able to come up with wonderful ideas. A good one was that we should keep having these vision conversations with foot washing and love feast at every annual conference because the power of relational church is important. Our ordinances have great power still, even when foot washing is executed in dry basins with wet wipes and when a love feast of single serve portions leaves a mountain of plastic trash on the table (I'm sure we could do better

with practice!). I feel that our leadership worked hard and did a great job of building the scaffolding for the work of painting the ceiling. I am skeptical that our current staff will be able to find the prophet, that Michelangelo, who will join us together to create art for the glory of God.

What may the future hold for the denomination? Many people from the conservative side declined to participate in love feast and foot washing, a blow that hurt. Many individual evangelical churches are negotiating with their districts to leave the denomination. In our more relaxed moments, the progressive wing felt secure in the leadership and resources we have within OEP, SCN, Open Table and WC. We shall see what God has in store for the Brethren today.



NOAC reflections and invitation

For years I've heard that National Older Adult Conference (NOAC) is the "fun and inspiring" version of Annual Conference (you know, without the business!). This year I signed up to be a volunteer since I'm not of age to register for NOAC. I bet NOAC would have been fun and inspiring even if we *had* done business! Though I appreciate getting together to worship, connect and serve *without* thinking one more statement or conversation will bring God's Kin(g)dom any sooner.

One comment at NOAC: "This is the Church of the Brethren at its best." Another comment: "No, we're never at our best when we're one-sided." What do *you* think? What is the Church of the Brethren *at our best*?

I actually don't think NOAC was one-sided at all, though we did hear explicit references to LGBTQ inclusion and wholeness-of-persons three times from the pulpit/lectern, and we never heard anyone advocating for LGBTQ exclusion or dehumanization. I think that's what sounded "one-sided" to some people. But I resist superficial soundbites proving our spirit, whether I like the words or not!

"The Church of the Brethren at its best is potlucks" says my secular uncle. "The Church of the Brethren at its best is serving with Brethren Disaster Ministries regardless of anyone's theology" says someone in my congregation. "The Church of the Brethren at its best is . . . "What do *you* say? Email, tweet or facebook us!

The Church of the Brethren at its best is _____



The Time Is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage by Joan Chittister

By Kathy Gingrich

Sister Joan Chittister's newest book is a healing and provocative salve for wounded and weary souls. In an era of "Fake News" and deeply divided and chaotic leadership and communities in our country and around the world, Sister Joan speaks truth to power. She names the "elephants in the room" and acknowledges the "emperor has no clothes."

She boldly challenges us with her theological understanding of the call and impact of past prophets and the awakening of prophets that are within us and around us. Prophets, though rarely popular in real time, risk all to bear witness to "the Eternal Will of God for Creation".

Sister Joan's understanding of God's eternal will challenges us to put our faith in to practiced spirituality advocating for courageous, bold action against injustice, abuse of women, prejudice, disregard for the environment, oppressive governments and regimes. Now is not the time to dismiss ourselves as lacking gifts or skills or unfit to bear God's Word to a broken and breaking world.

She reminds us that God is "doing something new". In this time, we are God's energetic and wise prophets bearing witness to a new just, loving and gracious world. Following Jesus, living the Gospel, loving our neighbors, upholding "rightness" in a world gone "wrong" with corruption, divisiveness, self-centeredness, and increasing wealth for the world's wealthiest is a tough job, but someone's got to do it. Joan would say that someone is you and me, current day prophets.

Joan reminds us the reign of God is now! We are bearers of hope. We carry the vision of a loving, just and gracious new world order. Through putting our faith into "practical and powerful activism", each of us can help bring about the fullness of life lived in alignment with God's will.

Added note: I was especially looking forward to hearing Sister Joan Chittister at NOAC. She was a powerful and dynamic speaker, alive and attuned with God's Spirit, reminding the gathered sisters and brothers to immerse ourselves in the study and practice of The Beatitudes as together we seek The Common Good.

Amen, Sister Joan! Thank you for your Word and Witness!

She Speaks in her Own Voice

By Bobbi Dykema

I grew up on a farm in rural North Dakota; the town where I went to high school was home to fewer than a thousand people. I had really good grades, so I probably could have been accepted into a long list of colleges; in fact, my high school superintendent encouraged me to apply to places as far away as the University of Southern California. So my mother, whose name was Mary, was quite relieved when I decided to matriculate at the University of Mary in Bismarck, under the auspices of a community of Benedictine sisters.

She referred to it as the "University of Mom."

Even though we Protestants don't tend to put a lot of emphasis on Mary – we tend to shy away from practices associated with Roman Catholicism, and with forms of reverence that feel like they should be reserved for God alone – we still, I think, have a sense of Mary, Jesus's mother, as being particularly kind, gentle, wise, and holy, as well as sweet and motherly. The girls that are chosen to play Mary in Christmas pageants are those who can sit still and smile

beatifically at a doll baby they hold tenderly in their arms.

Because we shy away from outright reverence toward Mary, I think we sometimes miss some of the nuances and complexities of her character and her calling. Actually, I think Catholics miss some of them too, because they also focus on gentle Mary, meek and mild, who is always loving and welcoming and protective of sinners.

But in our gospel reading for today (Luke 1:39-56), if we look closely, we get a picture of a Mary

Continued on page 5

who is loving and gentle and wise and holy, yes – but also powerful and prophetic, connected in myriad ways with the Jewish prophetic tradition going back hundreds of years before her, and even with the great patriarch of the Jewish faith, Abraham himself. Mary is not, or not just, a submissive teenage girl willing to accept God's call to become the mother of the Messiah. In her initial appearance on the great stage of the story of human salvation, Mary experienced personally what it was like to be both lowly and exalted, in a way that empowered her to give voice to God's powerful care for the oppressed and marginalized well beyond the borders of her own community.

In the verses just before our gospel passage for today begins, Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel. This is undoubtedly an astonishing experience all by itself. Not only did an angel come to visit Mary personally, this angel greeted Mary in a fairly exalted manner: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" Mary's first reaction is confusion. What on earth is this angel doing here, and what is he trying to say? Does he really mean me, or has there been some cosmic mixup?

Mary doesn't say anything, but Gabriel reads her confusion and goes on: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

If this speech of proclamation were meant to make Mary feel more at ease, it seems to have failed miserably. I can imagine a teenage girl of our own time responding to all of these predictions with one word: "What?" Mary, too, has questions, but she voices them with a bit more specificity: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Gabriel explains: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[d] will be holy; he will be called Son of God." And then Gabriel gives Mary a sign: "And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

The sign of her cousin Elizabeth's also miraculous pregnancy is important, because in the story of Elizabeth's conception, and the angel's appearance to her husband the priest Zechariah, we are told that Elizabeth has been in seclusion for the past five months – nobody but she and Zechariah know she's pregnant. So the angel is clearly giving Mary some insider information by which she can verify that what she is being called to do is also trustworthy. And in fact Mary seems to be willing to accept all this based on the explanation and sign, and she offers herself in submission to the word of God as transmitted by the angel Gabriel: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Interestingly enough, in the Muslim faith, Mary is highly respected because of this very speech in Luke 1:38. The word "Islam" means "submission" – submission to the will of God – and

Mary here is seen as an exemplar of what it looks like to submit to God's will. But there is more to her than that, as we shall see in a moment.

Mary's word of acceptance is a lot more powerful than it appears in English translation, as well. The word she uses that is translated "servant" is the Greek *doulē*, which really means something more like "slave." Slavery in first-century Palestine meant that a person was essentially owned by another person and required and expected to do their owner's will in all things. If they ever gained freedom, it would be at the discretion of the owner.

But since Mary describes herself as the "slave of God," that means something more, and something different. If she is the slave of God, she cannot be the slave of any human being. She also, by this self-description, places herself in the same category as the apostle Paul, who in several of his letters describes himself as the "slave of Christ," and of her son Jesus, whom Paul in Philippians 2:7 describes as "taking the form of a *doulos*" - the male equivalent of a *doulē*. Jesus demonstrates this servanthood in the gospel of John when he washes the disciples' feet – a task that was normally given to a household slave. So even before Jesus is born, the very notion of slavery is being shifted as a path of faith, to serve God by serving others.

Mary's response of agreement with God's plan takes us right up to the start of our passage for today, when she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth and sees for herself. I imagine Elizabeth being overjoyed to see her youthful cousin coming down the road! Those of you who have

Continued on page 6

been pregnant know how absolutely exhausting it can be even when you're young, and Elizabeth was old enough that she and her husband had confidently assumed they were long past childbearing. I'm guessing Elizabeth was glad of the help her young, energetic cousin could provide.

Now remember that when Gabriel appears to Mary and lays out God's plan and her place in it, part of the explanation for how she will conceive is that "the Holy Spirit will overshadow you." When Mary arrives at Elizabeth's home, the Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth as well, and what she says to Mary is no ordinary greeting: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." By this speech, Elizabeth becomes the first person in Luke's gospel to recognize Jesus as the son of God.

You probably are aware that in first-century Palestine, women were of very low account. A woman without a father, husband, or son to provide for her was effectively destitute, and women's words were considered of so little worth that a woman could not testify in a legal matter. Yet here, at the beginning of the Christian salvation story, are two women, filled with the Holy Spirit, testifying and prophesying. Although they are gathered together in a private place – Elizabeth's home – they are discussing weighty matters of public import, the politics and theology not only of their own

community but of all times and places to come. Clearly God is doing a new thing on the earth!

Mary responds to Elizabeth's Spirit-charged greeting with an outpouring of Spirit-filled song, known as the Magnificat from the first word of her song in Latin translation. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant." Here again the word that Mary uses is *doulē*, slave. But why does she consider herself lowly? According to tradition from early Christian writings that were not included in the New Testament, Mary came from a wealthy family.

But recall that in the gospel of Matthew, when Mary's fiance Joseph learns that she is pregnant, he considers "putting her away privately." This would leave Mary in a state of extreme vulnerability, as her parents would be considered justified in throwing her out as well; indeed, she could even be stoned to death if it was believed that the father of her unborn child was a married man. In fact, the word used for "lowly" in Greek is *tapeinosis*, which means something closer to "humiliated."

Interestingly, the gospel of Matthew begins with an ancestral lineage of Jesus, one that names only four women: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Ruth – each one a woman who was unprotected by a husband at a key moment in her life. Not only is the Lord doing a new thing on the earth, but throughout the generations has chosen some very interesting people to be the carriers of that promise.

Mary doesn't even mention Jesus or her pregnancy throughout her entire song. Rather, she lifts up a broad perspective of how the Lord

has moved in the midst of humankind to do great things. God is merciful, strong, scatters the proud; brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly; fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away. God is a God who keeps promises.

Biblical scholars have noted that this song bears a strong resemblance to the song of Hannah in First Samuel. But it is not just Hannah – in her words and in her story, Mary's depiction in the gospel of Luke has resonances with the patriarchs and matriarchs Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Jacob; with the prophets and leaders Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, and Samson; with women like Jael, the wife of Manoah, Ruth, and Judith; with the priest Eli, the prophets Samuel, Daniel, and Micah, with the mighty King David and the writer of the Psalms. Jewish Christians hearing Mary's song proclaimed in worship would have understood that she was not just a simple, trusting teenage girl who agreed to have a baby on God's behalf; she was a prophet in her own right.

In fact, Mary in some respects is being depicted here as the new Abraham. Like Abraham, Mary's faithful response to God's call makes her the first of a new people. And like Abraham, her child belongs not to her but to God – in fact, Mary's child IS God. And the Lord God Creator and King of the Universe deigned to leave all of the power and glory of heaven behind and be born as a tiny helpless infant human child, the son of Mary's womb.

This child, this Son of God, was to be born not in the Temple, the Holy of Holies, but in a stable. Nor

Continued on page 7

was this child to be born in the palace of the king, in the halls of power. God does a new thing on the earth through Mary in a way that makes it clear that the values of the world are going to be turned upside-down by the incarnation of the One God in human flesh.

And Mary can be seen not just as a new Abraham, but as a living, human Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was crafted as a way for God to become present among the people, and so was Mary's pregnancy a way God became tangibly present amidst humankind. One of the titles for Mary in the Greek Orthodox Church is *Theotokos* – bearer of God.

And notice how Gabriel describes the mode by which Jesus will be conceived – the Holy Spirit will “overshadow” Mary. This is very similar language to how creation itself began, with God brooding over the formless void from which all that exists was brought forth. Jesus is a new creation on the earth, accomplished by God through the willing participation of Mary.

Where does all of this leave us? The story of Jesus's conception and birth is an old familiar one, but what does this new look at Mary, the mother of Jesus, have to teach us today?

The theme for this fourth and final Sunday of Advent is Love – that out of God's incredible love for humankind, Jesus, God's Son, was willing to give up the power and glory of heaven and become enfleshed as a tiny helpless human babe, to experience all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that flesh is heir to, as Shakespeare's Hamlet puts it, to

teach and heal and bless those whom he encountered, and ultimately to be arrested, tortured, and put to death as a common criminal, an enemy of the state. And then to rise again, to demonstrate the power of the Son of God over death itself. And all for love.

There's a beautiful song recorded by Amy Grant that describes this power of love: “Love has come, for the world to know. As the wise men knew, such a long time ago. And I believe that angels sang, that hope had begun, when the God of glory, who was full of mercy, sent his Son.”

When Love comes among us in this powerful way, how do we respond?

First of all, I think the experience and example of Mary must lead us to ask some powerful questions about how we see the poor and lowly, the humiliated and disadvantaged, the marginalized and vulnerable, in our own context. Do we see them as *Theotokos* – as bearers of God, and of God's holy image? For it was not just Mary who was called to bear God within herself – that is the calling of each one of us.

How do we interact with and relate to the poor and vulnerable among us? Do we follow the example of our leaders who would separate children from their parents, cut off an important source of nutrition for those who are hungry and food-insecure, sneer at and disparage those whose income is insufficient to provide for their own needs? Do we choose to look away, to pass by on the other side, to refuse to acknowledge the humanity and dignity of such folks?

I think we have figured out the answers to those questions, at least,

that the way of Jesus is pretty much the opposite of this kind of political posturing. I was glancing over the instructions for those delivering Christmas meals on Tuesday – to not just drop off a container of food, but to take the time to greet the recipient, say hello, acknowledge and connect with their humanity. To listen. To give them space to speak in their own voice and let the Holy Spirit speak through them to us, just as Mary let the Spirit speak through her.

Throughout the story of Jesus, we see that God is doing a new thing in the world – a new thing rooted in God's incredible love for us – but through people that the world considers of no account. Not just Mary, but all the great leaders and prophets whose words are echoed in her own. Moses, who was a stutterer, and a murderer. David, who was an adulterer and murderer. Jacob, who stole his brother's birthright and blessing. Hagar, an Egyptian slave. And on and on and on.

When we listen to Mary speaking in her own voice, as a prophet of the poor, what is she saying to us today? I think it is this: if we want to hear God, we'd best prepare ourselves to receive that voice coming from the lips of those whom we'd least expect. My prayer is that when God chooses to speak through such a one in our midst, we are willing and able to hear and to listen, with eyes and ears of love. Amen.





Womaen's Caucus Needs Your Financial Support to Continue

With your continued support Womaen's Caucus can do so much to help further our mission of decreasing prejudice within the Church, empowering women and advocating for people on the margins. This year we have put focused energy into growing our steering committee and commitments. We continue to find tangible ways to live out our mission and build community.

Options: complete the form below, visit our website at www.womaenscaucus.org and use the donate button, and/or select Womaen's Caucus to receive 0.5% of your purchases at smile.amazon.com.

Make checks payable to: Womaen's Caucus

Cut & mail to: Womaen's Caucus, 818 SW 3rd Ave., #E1299, Portland, OR 97204

Name _____	Contribution	Membership
Address _____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$100	<input type="checkbox"/> I am already a member
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$75	<input type="checkbox"/> Membership — \$25/yr
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$50	<input type="checkbox"/> Student member — \$15/yr
Email _____	<input type="checkbox"/> \$25	Femailings
Phone _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Already receiving
District/Home Church (if applicable) _____		<input type="checkbox"/> Send by mail
_____		<input type="checkbox"/> Send by email



Looking ahead . . .

Coming to our website later this Fall

- ⇒ Information on how to view the video of our Womaen's Caucus 2019 Annual Conference Luncheon featuring **Deanna Brown** and **Barbara West**.
(Thanks, Enten Eller!)
- ⇒ "Feminist Advent Resources"

Visit our website at
www.progressivebrethren.org/womaenscaucus
for these and other resources.