



## Womaen's Caucus of the Church of the Brethren

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Dear Leaders of the Church of the Brethren,

Greetings in the name of the Way, the Truth, and the Life - Jesus!

Each year, Annual Conference attendees look forward to singing the beloved hymn, *Move in our Midst*. Across generations and geography, identities and ideologies, we prayerfully blend our voices as we ask God to walk with us through the storm and the calm, to free us so that we can build new worlds in God's name. As we become a chorus, we attend to the dynamics that we know are important for us to sing well together. We listen to our neighbors, tempering our voices to welcome theirs. We encourage those new to the song, leading them when needed as we synchronize our words into a message of faith. We sing as one. When the last notes fade away, we pause to savor our togetherness. Sadly, that moment of grounded faith soon fades. We fall back into patterns and practices intended to shut out persons and ideas that are perceived as not fitting with the current "melody line" of the denomination.

Ironically, the cancellation of Annual Conference 2020 reversed this yearly pattern, offering instead an effective new format for interaction and, more importantly, enabling critical conversations that most certainly will move the denomination forward in Christ's call to love one another as God loves us. On July 3, rather than host its Annual Conference luncheon, the Church of the Brethren Womaen's Caucus hosted the online panel "Speaking Truth to Power" that was joined by people on approximately 100 devices and later watched by several hundred additional viewers.

During this extraordinary event, three sisters who have devoted significant portions of their lives to the work of the Church of the Brethren, Debbie Eisenbise, Gimbiya Kettering, and Madalyn Metzger, stepped forward in vulnerable authenticity to probe ways that we experience power through our denominational faith community - individually and collectively.

As the steering Committee of Womaen's Caucus, we call upon you to watch that event as it was recorded through Living Stream. We ask that you suspend any personal judgments about the speakers' perceptions or recollections, replacing your reactions with openness to what can be learned from the words shared so honestly. When you tire of listening, recognize that those drawn to the topic because of their own concerns remained online for nearly two hours in order to ask questions and comment from their own perspectives. This time together was more than a *Move in our Midst* moment. It is movement.

In addition to absorbing the words of the panel members, we and all participants in the event are encouraged to ask ourselves the questions below that had been posed to the panelists. As persons in the most powerful leadership roles in the denomination, we call upon you, too, to ask yourselves these questions. We also call upon you to discuss your responses with one another as a way of auditing your personal influence on the lives and faith of those you lead.

1. How has your identity helped and hindered your journey within the denomination?
2. What is one story you have about speaking truth to power in the denomination?
3. What does it mean to have inclusive power structures? How would that look in our faith community?
4. Where do you find/receive strength, given that the work of speaking truth to power can take a heavy emotional and spiritual toll?
5. What do you think the Spirit of Truth is guiding us to? What is she showing us of things to come?

The most recent Newslines highlighted the new level of virtual experiences that replaced Annual Conference 2020. Ironically, the news story focused on the preparation and delivery of the worship service and concert. Noticeably absent in the article was consideration of ways that audience members received what was presented and how they felt connected to the mission of the church because of their participation.

As we reflect upon the impact of the panel “*Speaking Truth to Power*”, we celebrate the success of the electronic format that brought people together and, more importantly, express deep gratitude for the authenticity and attentiveness of the three women who drew the viewers into new understandings of power and the potential for new thoughts to become new practice. Three outcomes of our reflection are shared with you.

- At a time when our country is confessing the oppression of people of color through its time-honored structures and cultural practices, the Church of the Brethren must confess the injustice of its own exclusionary practices as described by the panel and experienced by others. The time is now for engaging such discussions as evidenced by the many participants who remained with the panel conversation long after the intended conclusion. The denominational response should not be just a letter of comfort to the afflicted but should be a challenge for us to audit our own processes for making decisions, empowering leaders, and welcoming all persons into the presence of Christ’s love.
- In the Church of the Brethren, it takes courage to speak honestly about one’s own experiences when those experiences challenge denominational assumptions or the brotherhood of leaders. Each of the panelists was aware that her comments could have negative consequences personally or professionally, but because of a deep love for the church, each was willing to open her heart so that others could do the same. This is true leadership – placing the good of others over your own gain. It is our hope that persons who have been marginalized within the Church of the Brethren will be inspired to take comparable leadership roles and that the current, male-dominated structures step back to welcome and support emerging voices that more broadly represent the diversity of current and growing faith communities.
- While attended by far more people than would have joined the luncheon at Annual Conference, the event’s simple format provided an intimate setting grounded in love and respect through which persons felt sufficiently safe to pose difficult questions or share personal statements. And it reflected the mission of the Women’s Caucus. As an organization, we are committed to continuing conversations to open pathways that build strong, diverse church leadership with the more than 350 persons who have viewed the event and many others who are wanting the Church of the Brethren to be their faith home. As leaders, you are invited to be a part of this ongoing work through direct interaction with the Steering Committee or participation in our

events. We believe that we can mark this time in history as a new day when all persons are equally heard and equally loved.

The video of the “Speaking Truth to Power” panel discussion can be found at <https://livestream.com/livestreamcob/speakingtruth>. Information about the Womaen’s Caucus can be found at [www.womaenscaucus.org](http://www.womaenscaucus.org) or on Facebook. We can be reached at [womaenscaucuscob@gmail.com](mailto:womaenscaucuscob@gmail.com).

At the close of the panel, we invited participants to provide a benediction through the Chat function of the video. We share these words offered on behalf of all.

*“Let our vulnerability connect us more deeply to the true source of power and remind us that God’s power is exemplified in vulnerability and courageous love.”*

With gratitude for the gifts of all as we spread God’s word,

Church of the Brethren Womaen’s Caucus Steering Committee, 2020

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