



It's the end of the world as we know it

Anna Lisa Gross
Common Spirit COB

The names of each person dead. Holiday and other traditions we're forgoing this year. Anxiety about job security and health insurance. Congregations leaving the denomination. New records set each month for numbers of people living as refugees.

The grief we're carrying may push us to our knees. Corn stalks in my state are brittle and breaking under

their weight, and the harvest begins. The trees in my neighborhood release leaves for the lean winter. What can we harvest, and what can we release, of the burdens we're bearing?

We pray that this newsletter ministers to the grief and the celebration you're feeling, and that it nourishes you to harvest and release what you can no longer carry.

Prayer for the breaking of the church / prayer of resolution . . .

Grief & Celebration

Mary Scott-Boria
First COB, Chicago

My heart is so very heavy over all that has happened these last 4 years. I'll soon be 70, and I never imagined that my grandchildren and other children and others' grandchildren's lives and possible futures would be stolen like this. It's so clear that we have to fight for every single thing this society promises. Nothing is to be

taken for granted. After almost 30 years of pushing anti-racism work to find a place in our society, and when its tenets are accepted by so many, it gets snatched right from under our feet. The promise of owning so we can heal and move beyond a past fraught with much anguish is once again smashed in our face with more fervor than we could have imagined. We have no choice but to fight like hell with all we have in us. I'll stand by you, if you stand by me. We are tied together. Let's not eat each other up in distrust and misunderstanding. We all stand to lose so much. I love you!

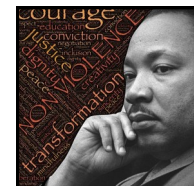
I Have a Dream

by Ruth Nalliah
Manchester COB

There are grave concerns about social injustices in the times in which we live. These days, the church is especially engaged in concerns about racial violence, and the continued relevance, credibility, and self-consistency of the church to the world at large is as important as

ever. The genius of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his public cry for racial justice is that in a world full of bad news and turmoil, he was able to articulate a dream which creates an image for us of what we can become.

His courage to speak this dream continues as an inspiration both in the times we live and to all oppressed, invisible, or forgotten people groups.



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This inspiration was key in the following address delivered on January 5, 2020, to the Questers Sunday School Class at my church.

The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of women's right to vote. Earlier last year, congresswomen wore suffragette white, which I like to call pre-suffrage white, to the State of the Union Address in Congress. I don't usually dress like this, but I've gone out on a limb and worn pre-suffrage white today, even if I'm not entirely comfortable in an outfit which stands out a little.

One of the things that I wrestle is that the denomination calls itself "Church of the Brethren." I just can't develop the habit of referring to the body of Christ as a fraternal organization — so I try to avoid using the denominational name when I speak. So when it comes to the denominational name, you might say that I'm a conscientious objector.

But I've also worn pre-suffrage white as a sign of hope, because I have a dream.

I have a dream that, one day, the term "Brethren," which appears as a term of endearment to some and a term of exclusion to others, can be updated with language which clearly communicates the true spirit of the denomination to our modern world.

I have a dream that, one day, the denomination will be free to change its name to something that's unequivocally inviting to all genders and all people, not because a few people complained, but because a majority of people want to.

I have a dream that, one day, instead of trying to preserve the memory of our spiritual ancestors by preserving the way they spoke, more importantly we will preserve their passion for social justice to all, and their resilience in doing the right thing.

I have a dream that, when traditions begin to defeat their intended purpose, the historic peace church will no longer find itself shackled by its own traditions, but will be free to use language by which it can lead the rest of the world.

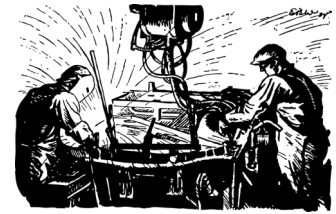
I have a dream that one day the church will come together with its linguistic abilities, creativity, resourcefulness, and passion for social justice to pen its new name that reflects both its legacy and what it hopes to become.

I have a dream that, one day, the historic peace church will be thoughtful and diligent, not only in having updated gender-specific language in hymns and Bible translations penned by other denominations, but will be able to be equally diligent in updating its own language which often appears in the largest font of all.

I have a dream that, one day, when our young people go and converse with congresswomen who have had the courage to go to work in the color that I'm wearing today, our young people won't be judged by the name of their denomination, but by the relevance of their message, and by the content of their character.

I have a dream that, one day, when our older people speak of the legacy of the denomination, there is no question in the minds of the young people that social justice is far more important than church tradition or ancestry.

I have a dream that, one day, the publishing company of the denomination, Brethren Press, founded on the power of words which are mightier than the sword, will call itself a name that will begin turning the world's swords into plowshares —including the sword between the sexes.



I have a dream that, one day, the denomination's most precious commodity, the light of the world, will no longer be hidden under a linguistic lampshade, but that the denomination's true character will be unambiguously evident and abundantly shown to all.

I have a dream that, one day, we will call ourselves a name that assures the world of the expanse of God's kin-dom, that from all ink spilled on every public sign and every bulletin header, on every piece of stationery and every new spine of our books, both we and the world will clearly know that the Good News extends far beyond a specific gender or a specific gene pool, and that God's kin-dom includes all people, all genders, all races, all ethnicities, and people of ALL ancestry, who are invited to share in the feast at the table.

Goshen College recently changed the names of its choirs from gender-specific titles to non-gender-specific ones, for the sake of transgender students in their choirs, and in the process came up with more creative and meaningful names:

- Voices of the Earth (formerly Women's World Music Choir)
- Vox Profundi (meaning Voices from the Deep, after the words of the psalmist; formerly the Goshen College Men's Chorus)

I have every confidence and hope that the denomination possesses the talent, creativity, and courage to transform its denominational name into a creative reflection of its values.

"I Can't Breathe"

In our end is our beginning. Valerie Kaur ministers to millions with revolutionary love. She honors the pain and fear of these times we're living in. And she asks: is this the darkness of the tomb, or the darkness of the womb? What in America is waiting to be born? And what does the midwife tell us? Breathe! and Push! We are certainly living through both endings and beginnings, in both the womb and the tomb. And "breathe" is essential counsel for every time, for every season. What worries or stresses or grief leads you to hold your breath today? May you soften and open, breathing Spirit into your worthy body, as you read Christy Waltersdorff's words on breath. -Anna Lisa Gross

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff
Acts 2:1-21
May 31, 2020, Pentecost Sunday
York Center COB

"I can't breathe!" Have you ever said that?

- Maybe in the midst of an asthma attack or an anxiety attack?
- Maybe you dove into a pool or the ocean and misjudged how much air you had in your lungs and started to panic as you struggled back up to the surface.
- Maybe you were wrestling with your friends or siblings and someone put you in a headlock or sat on your chest and wouldn't move. And you couldn't breathe.

When you know that you need to draw air into your lungs, but you can't — it is terrifying.

We learn at a very young age that breath is life. Each inhaled breath provides us with new energy. Each exhale releases old, stale energy. It takes us on average 3.3 seconds to inhale and exhale. And we mostly do it without thinking about it - until we can't. And when we can't — it suddenly becomes the most important thing in the world.

At rest we breathe about 16 times a minute, that's 960 times an hour, 23,040 times a day. On average we take 670 million breaths in a lifetime. Thirty pounds of air enters our lungs every day. Each molecule of

air we bring into our lungs builds our bones, muscles, blood, brains, and organs. Take a breath. Now exhale. You just reinvigorated your cells.

Journalist James Nestor has just launched a new book called *BREATH*. He spent ten years researching and writing about how we breathe and about how most of us do it very poorly. It is a fascinating read. He writes, "To breathe is to absorb ourselves in what surrounds us, to take in little bits of life, understand them, and give pieces of ourselves back out. Respiration can lead to restoration."

Nestor details several studies that show the "greatest indicator of life span isn't genetics, diet, or daily exercise. It is lung capacity. The smaller and less efficient lungs become (due to disease or disuse) the quicker the person dies. Larger lung capacity equals longer life."

He writes, "The ability and willingness to breathe fully is a matter of life and death." Shallow breathing (which most of us do) can, literally, kill you. Nestor found that there is nothing more essential to our health and well-being than breathing: take air in, let it out, repeat.

We are living through a pandemic that attacks our lung capacity. The most serious cases end up on ventilators which breathe for them, until, hopefully, they can do it for themselves again. One respiratory nurse said that much of

his job with COVID-19 patients feels like trying to pump air into a brick.

And this week we watched in horror as a man was suffocated by a police officer who knelt on his neck for over eight minutes. George Floyd, called for his mother. He pleaded with the officers, "I can't breathe. Please. I can't breathe!"

In an essay entitled, "Hope Out Of Breath: On the Lynching of George Floyd," Deb Masten writes, "My Black life was already out of breath when I woke up this morning. Already enduring too many laps of the resilience and lament race, not having the privilege of dealing with and relaxing my way through episodic grief, I instead needed a psychological ventilator to resuscitate my breathing from the 24-hour news levels of pain and anguish. Sure, I remain standing. Knowing that Black Lives Matter to God. That in addition to creating life God is the author and finisher of life, the One who actually sings and delights over my life, who sits on the throne of righteousness and justice, who literally breathed life into all humankind. And yet," she writes . . .

"And yet, my hope is out of breath. My patience is out of breath. My trust is out of breath. My peace is out of breath. My joy is out of breath. My tears are out of breath. My words are out of breath. My love is out of breath. My prayers are out of breath. My longing for justice is out of breath."

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And on this day, of all days, we are celebrating Pentecost, the remembrance of the time God breathed the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus's motley crew of disciples and gave birth to the church. After his death and resurrection, Jesus told his disciples to go to Jerusalem and to wait for the arrival of the Holy Spirit. They had no idea how long it would take or what it would look like. They worried that they might somehow miss it. But they did what Jesus told them to do and they waited — together.

It was the time of the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, which marked the end of the spring harvest. Thousands of people, from all over the world, streamed into Jerusalem for the holiday. And still the disciples waited- all together. They didn't have to worry about missing the Holy Spirit, though, because when it arrived it practically knocked them off of their feet. All of the sudden the room they were in erupted with wind and flame and noise! It was a holy hurricane!

A blessed tornado! And by the end of the day the community of believers had grown from 120 to over 3000 souls and the church was born.

The Holy Spirit breathed the power of God into these ordinary women and men. As they inhaled the energy and power of the Risen Christ they were transformed into a force to be reckoned with.

In the creation stories in Genesis, it is the Spirit, the breath of God that gives life to the first human being. And now on the day of Pentecost, it is that same breath of God that gives life and power and hope to the friends of Jesus. One

theologian (Kalbryn McLean) calls the Holy Spirit "wild child of the Trinity."

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann speaks of the Holy Spirit as the "dangerous energy and presence of Jesus, who is still alive in the world today." We need to pay attention to that word, "dangerous," because the Holy Spirit is not something we can control any more than we can control an earthquake or a tidal wave. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit brought with it noise and wind and fire. And perhaps, most frightening of all, it brought with it the transforming power of the Risen Christ.

What is so amazing about this Holy Wind is that it was for everyone - not just for the disciples, not just for the inner circle, not just for those who knew Jesus, not just for those who passed a religion test. It was for everyone-- whether they wanted it or not, whether they knew what to do with it or not everyone was included. People of all languages; people from places you can't even pronounce; people who deserved it and those who didn't.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit was not a secret. Everyone saw it and heard it. Not everyone knew what it meant- and some didn't want to know. But those who welcomed that rejuvenating breath of God found new life and purpose. Luke makes it very clear in this story at the beginning of Acts that the Holy Spirit is the maker of holy chaos; literally blowing every pre-conceived notion of God's power and presence right out the window. The Holy Spirit is the sacred agitator; the divine disrupter. The Holy Spirit came teaching people how to breathe in a new way, a more powerful way, a

more inclusive way, the way of God.

In the aftermath of this raucous phenomenon a new community was born. The people took care of each other and reached out to those in need. They studied the ancient scriptures and they told stories of the life of Jesus. They worshiped and prayed and ate together. People were healed and welcomed; they were loved and challenged; and they were introduced to Jesus Christ.

And people in the surrounding area noticed how they lived and what they did and they said, "I want to be a part of this too." And the church inhaled the breath of the Holy Spirit and exhaled the grace of God. And the church grew and the world was changed forever!

So my question is: when did the Church stop breathing? When did we stop raising a holy ruckus; turning over the tables of established religion and society when it interferes with the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ? Knowing how the church was born, with such big, deep, generous breaths from God, how have we allowed it to become so complacent, to become such a shallow breather? Knowing how the church was born in the midst of such extravagance, how have we allowed it to become a place of hoarding God's blessings for just a few?

Knowing that the gift of the Spirit of God brings new life — how have we, in the church, become so set in our old, worn out ways?

Before we pray for the Holy Spirit to come among us, we better be darn sure we know what we are asking for. We better be sure we are ready for what it may bring, and be ready to go where it leads.

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New Testament professor, Beverly Roberts Gaventa suggests that “we want the Spirit to be like airplane coffee, weak but reliable, and administered in small quantities.”

Scripture makes it clear that God doesn’t dole out the Holy Spirit in bits and pieces- God POURS out the Spirit — soaks us with it, not in a trickle but in a torrent; not with an eye dropper but with a fire hose. The Holy Spirit is the power of God unleashed. The day it erupted in Jerusalem some were delighted and some were afraid; some were unwilling to inhale but others took a deep breath and jumped at the chance to be carried away by God’s amazing grace.

So, when did the Church stop breathing?

As long as a black man (Ahmaud Arbery) can be shot while jogging, or suffocated (George Floyd) by a cop while handcuffed. As long as a black woman (Breonna Taylor) can be shot to death in her own bed by police or killed (Sandra Bland) while in a jail cell — the church is not breathing.

As long as the COVID19 virus can invade the homes of the most vulnerable of our population, with little concern from politicians looking only for re-election, the church is not breathing.

As long as our LGBTQ brothers and sisters are not allowed full acceptance in the body of Christ, the church is not breathing.

As long as war ravages the lives of innocent people and refugees are turned away from the shores of safety, the church is not breathing.

As long as immigrants languish in cages, separated from their families, on our southern border, the church is not breathing.

As long as corruption and greed and violence and injustice and oppression are given a pass — and even a pat on the back — by the highest levels of our government, the church is not breathing.

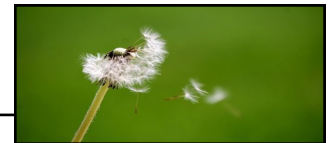
As long as our earth slowly suffocates under the weight of our mismanagement, our greed, and our apathy, the church is not breathing.

The Christian Church is at a turning point — the organizations and institutions to which we have clung tenaciously for generations are no longer sustainable — for some they never were. The world is changing quickly around us and we are often at a loss at how to respond. But we know how to respond — we just have to breathe. We have to inhale the power of the Holy Spirit and exhale the grace and transformation of God. If the Christian Church around the world would be willing to take a deep breath — to follow Christ’s call to serve and love others — nothing would ever be the same. And that scares many people. But I hope it doesn’t scare us.

This is a moment of great opportunity and great need for those who are willing to inhale the invigorating power of the Holy Spirit.

Our sisters and brothers are suffocating.

May we be among those who are not afraid to inhale.
Amen.



Affirmations

by Laura Hammonds
Crest Manor COB
South Bend, Indiana

I had a friend taking a theology class who had an interesting assignment. He was asked to attend services in denominations he had always been curious about. He asked if I wanted to go with him and I accepted his invitation. He expressed that he had always been curious about the Church of the Brethren. “I was raised in the Church of the Brethren. Let’s go to my home church

and see if I know anyone”, I proposed. I knew nearly everyone. My friend sat next to me, working on a hat he was knitting, as he had done at several other churches we visited together. I found it comforting to be singing familiar hymns. It was also refreshing to hear a message, which was both challenging and encouraging, for each of us to more closely exemplify Christ, affirming the COB values and culture. When the service was over, I went around greeting everyone. I think they thought he was my boyfriend: he is

not. He was very patient with all my talking and introducing. We left there long after the benediction.

As we drove to get coffee, he asked, “Is your church open and affirming?” I knew what he meant: “open” means that he would be welcome to become a member of the church: “affirming” means that he would be considered an equal to the extent that he, too, would be welcome to marry in the church. I had to think. Was it? “It’s open but not affirming”, I told him. And then, he

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said something that has stuck with me. He said, "Being not affirming is like saying you're equal but you can't vote". I invited him to go to church the next Sunday and he declined.

In December, for his 49th birthday, I wrote a poem about all the experiences in nature we had shared that year. I organized the piece by writing about each season separately. It ended up being a long poem. I can remember the two of us sitting in his dining room. I gave him a copy of the poem. I read my copy as he read along. At the end, the expression on his face was something like raw joy. (I didn't write poems as gifts, and he knew it.) And then, I was moved that he was so moved. It is a moment I won't soon forget.

A year later, at church, we had an interim pastor who knew I was a poet. She asked me to share a poem with the congregation. She was hoping it might have a theme about nature. I thought of that long poem immediately. I wasn't sure she would want it because it was a birthday poem. To my surprise, she was very

enthusiastic and supportive of the reading. I was not so excited. 'Great,' I thought, 'now I am going to get up and read the longest poem I have ever written, in public, for the first time, to a crowd.' I got nervous just thinking about it.

The Sunday of the reading, I sat next to the pastor during the service. When it was my time to read, I went up to the podium. Nothing weird happened with the microphone, so I thought I was off to a good start. I was a little nervous but getting through it. Each line reminded me of each adventure we had shared. The further I got into my reading, the more I thought about both my friend and his discomfort. The longer I read, the more I thought of the lack of acceptance he felt during his visit. The idea began to consume my mind that he didn't feel comfortable or accepted by the very same people who were attentively listening now.

As I read, my voice began to quiver. As I got to the line about frozen pinecones, I had to pause. I read on, but became openly distressed. I had to

stop several times to gather myself before I could continue reading. It was almost impossible to read the last line of the poem, "I hope I bring a fraction of the joy to your life that you bring to mine". It was during those closing stanzas that I was overcome with emotion, but not because I was thinking of my love for my friend. I was nearly in tears as I realized the congregation, my congregation, was open and affirming of a poem, but not a person.



(Editor's note: The above QR code is a link to Laura Hammond's poem on the Womæn's Caucus website.)



Caucus Podcasts

To continue the conversations that were started with our Speaking Truth to Power online panel, we've partnered with Messenger Radio. Each episode features different stories from individuals as they explore finding their voices of truth. Find all our episodes at <https://tinyurl.com/wcaucus-messengerradio>



Preparing to do the Work of Speaking Truth to Power

Bobbi Dykema

As Womaen's Caucus works to challenge sexism and racism in the Church of the Brethren, we have invited On Earth Peace to facilitate an exploration of the power and possibility of Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation as a method for interpersonal and group conflict, and nonviolent social change organizing.

During this session, we will explore the meaning of nonviolence (a rich conversation in our pacifist tradition!), consider the three social dynamics of nonviolence, and briefly introduce the 6 principles and 6 steps of Kingian Nonviolence.

This is a prelude to a longer multi-week strategy consultation and training series focused on Kingian Nonviolence in winter/spring 2021. Please join us Tuesday, November 10, 7:30 EST, (4:30 PST).

Plan on participating in a ninety-minute session led by Matt Guynn, director of church and community

organizing with On Earth Peace. He also serves as a member of the online training team of Training for Change, working with US and global social change groups.

Matt has served on the coordinating committee for the Oregon Poor People's Campaign since 2018. Since 2013, he has worked with a team to offer advanced online education in Kingian Nonviolence. In 2020, Matt coedited the book, *Resist, Organize, Transform: An Introduction to Nonviolence and Activism*, with JoanMay Cordova, Dean Johnson, and Regina Shands Stoltzfus.

This webinar will take place via Zoom. For more information about the upcoming webinar or to register as a participant, visit the Womaen's Caucus website (womaenscaucus.org). Instructions on using Zoom and the Zoom link with passcode will be provided.



*Merry Christmas
To All*

John 1:14

*“The Word became
flesh and blood, and
moved into the
neighborhood.*

*We saw the glory
with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind
glory, like Father,
like Son, generous
inside and out, true
from start to finish.”*



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

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