



Womaen's Caucus of the Church of the Brethren

April 19, 2021

Dear leaders of the Church of the Brethren and Annual Conference,

With gratitude for a God of creation and new creation, covenant and new covenant, we write in support of your efforts to understand effective organizational leadership and to develop adaptive leaders within the denomination.

We are deeply mindful of the leadership skills that are being advocated and the conditions they create within the Church of the Brethren. Consequently, we feel called to name the message of racism in the metaphor that anchors the book *Canoeing the Mountains* and that will be conveyed through the Annual Conference presentations by its author, Dr. Tod Bolsinger. This letter outlines our concerns and provides ten strategies for addressing white privilege that can be infused into the presentations that Dr. Bolsinger will be making during Annual Conference as well as into our ongoing denominational practices.

Canoeing the Mountain is intended to align effective leadership principles with the changing needs of the post-Christendom church. Drawing from well-regarded leadership theories, Dr. Bolsinger builds his case for leading into the unknown through the metaphor of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery Expedition.

Chartered by Thomas Jefferson to "offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce" and carried out by a permanent company of nearly 40 men representing the United States as well as Sacagawea, an enslaved Lemhi Shoshone woman, with her husband, and York, an enslaved Black man, the Corps spent three years charting a route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Its success assured the burgeoning practical and political white domination and superiority of the United States government. Given that the Lewis and Clark story serves as the primary illustration of leadership principles advocated by Moderator Munday and the Program and Arrangements Committee through Dr. Bolsinger's presence, it is important for all to understand how the racist offenses found in this metaphor conflict with stated values within the Church of the Brethren, including the Annual Conference statement against slavery as well as *Tribes of Many Feathers* (1994) and *Separate No More* (2007).

Although it was written in the midst of growing racial tension generated from the killings of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice, *Canoeing the Mountains* fails to reflect one of the greatest challenges within our society – the belief that the dominant race is superior to all others. Recent events of the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements, the shootings in Minneapolis, and growing antisemitism have been sparking self-reflection around the world, calling all to consider their place within systems that thrive on the subjugation of others. Dr. Bolsinger has acknowledged that awareness of the concept of white privilege has grown exponentially since his book was published, as evidenced through his interviews with Grace Ruitter recorded in *Faithward*. Her questions pointed to his lack of authentic empathy for select persons within the Corps who were denied equality, humanity, and dignity while he

simultaneously hailed them as heroes. She challenged stories that were retrofitted to justify past cultural assumptions and practices or that funneled all understanding through the lens of a single gender/race. Although his interview responses acknowledged a need to consider such issues, they lacked depth in understanding the hurt caused by both the content and writing style of his work. He assumed that the words in Chapter 14 and comments made elsewhere should be sufficient reparation for behaviors and attitudes within the Expedition as well as the impact of the Expedition itself.

More importantly, Dr. Bolsinger represents white men enjoying riches of fame and fortune at the expense of the oppressed persons who were an important part of the Corps of Discovery. He is an inheritor of the wealth created by the Expedition, including money and platform that our denomination is providing him through his role at Annual Conference. No explanation he provides about racism in the book can erase the symbolism of him as a primary beneficiary of that racism.

The strategic plan recently announced by Mission and Ministry Board states that “We will identify and critique, confess and repent of the whiteness and racialized hierarchy that have been integrated into Brethren identity, and we will dismantle those barriers and structures that prevent us from becoming a community of all nations, all people, all languages living together in the presence of God.” The timing of this commitment provides the denomination with an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate the application of Dr. Bolsinger’s adaptive leadership tools through the topic of racism in white Christian America. His work can serve to inform and enable additional efforts at all levels of the denomination.

As an organization striving to fulfill the prophetic task of creating a faith community free of attitudes and practices of injustice, we strongly encourage you to incorporate the following practices into denominational efforts and the presentations of Dr. Bolsinger at Annual Conference.

1. Commit to the formation of a new, permanent Gender and Racial Equity Council within the denominational structure. The purpose of this group will be to review proposed denominational and Annual Conference programming for its intercultural sensitivity, humility, and competence within the context of CoB statements and current efforts regarding race-based/culture-based policy.
2. Openly acknowledge the racist metaphor at the heart of *Canoeing the Mountain* and commit to using the leadership tools espoused in the book to launch denominational efforts toward extinguishing racism in our churches and neighborhoods. Call on all groups within the denomination to confront the racial barriers and hierarchies that prevent us from living wholly as equal sisters and brothers in Christ.
3. Given that he is a paid speaker to the Annual Conference, require Dr. Bolsinger to work with others in addressing the racism inherent in his book. Work closely with Dr. Bolsinger to develop his understanding of our historic opposition to the oppression of black persons, indigenous persons, and people of color.
4. Create a small advisory group for Dr. Bolsinger to discuss his AC presentations beforehand, focusing on intercultural sensitivity, competence, and context within CoB statements.
5. In keeping with the strategic plan, declare that white privilege allows most of us in the Church of the Brethren to assume unearned authority while consciously or unconsciously silencing the gifts of BIPOC. Wash the feet of brothers and sisters who have been harmed, repenting of the assumptions of privilege and working toward restorative justice.
6. Invite and compensate a Native American woman theologian to address leadership and its challenges through her cultural lens. Assure that her session receives comparable advertisement to Dr. Bolsinger’s sessions.

7. Require that all informational documents be made available online and through the AC resources page, and that introductions of Dr. Bolsinger alert people to concerns raised about the racism, overt and covert, projected through his book.
8. Openly support the Tokahookaadi Church of the Brethren and Chicago First Church of the Brethren with an AC donation that matches Dr. Bolsinger's AC speaking fees and associated costs.
9. Offer a facilitated, interactive Bible study (based on Richard Twiss' *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*) about the differences and their implications between colonial, settler Christianity and Native American faith traditions and values.
10. Support Black Brethren in developing a track for 2022 Annual Conference that brings their perspective to the future of the Church, including sermons, keynote sessions, and meal events.

We understand that history cannot and should not be rewritten but, rather, that it must be examined in light of cultural and moral application to today's world. The most Jesus-like behavior is to grow our understanding of God's call to each of us by discussing the overt racism of the Lewis and Clark Expedition metaphor as well as the covert racism found in so many Christian churches. Our question to you as denominational leaders is simple. From Bolsinger's printed and verbal messaging, what are you wanting the sisters and brothers of the Church of the Brethren to learn about loving all our neighbors as we have been loved by God?

Womaen's Caucus calls on you to address the river of racism that permeates the leadership metaphor endorsed by Dr. Bolsinger in *Canoeing the Mountains*. It is not too late to make necessary changes to this year's Annual Conference, and we urge you to do so as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

In prayer for wisdom and courage at this time,

Womaen's Caucus Steering Committee

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