

The Tie that Binds

1 Peter 3:8-22

“Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”

“⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” (1 Pete 3:8)

Lately, I’ve been taking note of the words to the hymns we sing every Sunday. I’ve reflected on what we are saying with the words we sing, then find myself wondering if we really are living out the messages of our well-loved and cherished hymns. There are people in the world today claiming to be Christians who say that immigration is a bad thing for our country. There are other people who claim to be Christian who are helping immigrants to settle and grow in our country. There are those who claim to be Christian who are anti-abortion, but pro-death penalty. Others who claim to be Christian who are pro-abortion and against the death penalty. And right now, the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion/exclusion is too tender for some to even engage in. Are we really united under the flag of Christ Jesus?

This morning's Sunday school lesson was about what constitutes resilient discipleship and authentic Christianity. According to the Barna Group a resilient disciple is someone who attends church at least monthly and engages with their church more than just for worship; they trust firmly in the authority of the Bible; they are committed to a personal relationship with Jesus and affirm that he was crucified and resurrected to conquer sin and death; and they express a desire to transform the broader society as an outcome of their faith. These folks make up only 20% of US Christians. Between 80 and 82% of these resilient disciples would say they are someone whose personal relationship with Jesus brings them deep joy and satisfaction; who believes that living in relationship with Jesus is the only way to find fulfillment in life; who believes their relationship with Jesus impacts the way they live their daily lives; who wants others to see Jesus reflected through them in actions and words; who believes following Jesus shapes their entire world – body, mind, heart, and soul; who feel reenergized when they spend time with Jesus.

The Barna Group offers two other categories of Christians: the habitual churchgoers (who make up 17% of US Christians) – these are people who attended church at least once a month in the past month, but do not share the same core beliefs as the resilient disciples. Of this group 40-48% agreed with the statements just mentioned about the impact of a relationship with Jesus. Nomads are lapsed Christians who have not

been to church in at least six months, and who make up 63% of today's US Christians, of this group 33-38% agreed with the statements given by resilient disciples.

The majority of each of these groups agree that they want to find a way to follow Jesus that connects with the world they live in. The Barna Group analysts infer that non-Christians, and I would add even some Christians, need to see Christians embodying what the Atlantic Northeast District has been calling "Jesus in the Neighborhood." There is a need to put feet to our faith to bridge the gap between what we say and what others perceive. So, I don't think it's much of a stretch to see why Dave Nichols, District Conference Moderator, chose 1 Peter 3:8 as the theme for this year's District Conference.

In his introduction to this year's Conference, Dave shared these thoughts:

"When we take our eyes off God and focus on other things, we lose the connectedness that should be church. Jesus commanded us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He didn't direct us to worry about controversies like the wearing of a beard, coverings, plain dress, or even sexual preferences and identity. Are these things important? Perhaps, but not so important that worry and concern about them results in the fracture of the church."

Sadly, it is worry over these and other subjects that has led to a fracturing of the Atlantic Northeast District with the dissolution of a number of churches over the last few years. However, all is not doom and gloom as the reports from this year's Conference attest.

This year's conference was a bit different in that we did not meet at Elizabethtown College. We met in Manheim at The Junction Center. Instead of sitting in rows in an auditorium, we sat around tables, much as we have done at Annual Conference. This will not be the norm however as the District Conference will return to E-town next year.

Dave Nichols started the meeting with a welcome and the introduction of a special guest. The president of the Church of the Brethren in Venezuela was in attendance. The Venezuelan Church of the Brethren consists of 45 congregations currently. Leonor Ochoa brought the morning meditation, interpreted by Dawn Sandoval, reflecting on the 1 Peter theme of the Conference. She said the main message is of love and being of the same mind, to be able to bless the world with radical forgiveness. With approval of the agenda, the meeting continued.

Pete Kontra, District Executive, was next to speak. He reminded everyone that 2023 marks the 300th anniversary of the Church of the Brethren in America, as well as the 300th anniversary of the Germantown Meetinghouse. There will be a number of activities to commemorate this historic event, so watch for announcements to come. Due to the loss

of several congregations, in addition to reduced given from remaining congregations, the District is looking at a restructuring of District leadership to streamline operations while still providing adequate service to member congregations. October 22, was designated as ANE Connect Sunday, where congregations were encouraged to worship with other CoB congregations. I happened to run into Enten Eller and asked if Ambler had an interest in doing this. He said they were already committed to connecting with another congregation but would be open to discussing how we might be able to interact with one another.

“When we are called to part, it gives us inward pain; but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.” These words from *Blest be the tie that binds*, speaks to the heartbreak experienced in the District with the dissolution of three more congregations: Lewiston, Akron, and New Beginnings congregations have chosen to break away from ANE District. Their dissolutions were approved by the gathered body.

As each commission brought their report a question was asked of the group. The church development report was given by Ryan Braught. His question was, “Share where you have connected with God, either individually or as a community.” Around the table we heard about a mom’s group, a program providing rides for seniors, sending youth to work camps, and adding a new playground at the church.

The Ministry commission report was given by Liz Bidgood Enders. She had one question and one announcement. The announcement was that all pastors in attendance would receive their choice of a Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks gift card. I guess the ministry commission understands how important caffeine is to us getting our job done! The question posed to the group was: How do you call or discern calls to ministry? Again, around the table we heard about a Wednesday Night Live event that featured dinner, kids' activities, and a Bible study for the adults. On a more unique level, there is a Bible study spin class! Exercise your faith and your body at the same time.

Karen Hackett gave the Nurture Commission report. The questions of "How can the commission help congregations?" and "How are we interacting?" Opened the floor to suggestions. Around our table there seemed to be deep thought, but no immediate answers.

Mary Etta Reinhart gave the report from the witness and outreach commission. Her questions were more to just get us thinking. They were "What gifts and abilities do we have to share?" "What gifts or abilities do we need?" and "How can ANE help meet the peace and justice needs of member congregations?"

The Stewardship Commission report was given by Kay Weaver, outgoing director of the commission, and Barb Coffman, Kay's successor. Given the declining giving to the District, the question of

“Are we inspired to support District ministries? Why or why not?” was meaningful. Although budgets are reviewed at congregational business meetings, I question how many members of ANE congregations are aware of how their congregation does or does not support the District. There are a number of churches that, although members of the District, do not give to support District ministries. I am thankful that here at Hatfield we have been generous in our giving to the District.

After a short break, Ray Flagg gave the financial report. Giving to the District was down \$21,000 in 2022. Fortunately, interest income was up enough to offset that loss. Being realistic about future giving, the annual budget is less than before. As part of the new budget, the line item for the PA Council of Churches was \$0. A statement from the floor noted that the PA Council of Churches was present at this meeting. It was agreed to make that line item \$1,000. Another suggestion was for District ministries to make videos to share with member congregations to introduce them to the work being done by each ministry. When the 2024 Fair Share Giving amount was discussed, the suggestion was made to challenge members to give \$1 more each month. The Fair Share amount of \$55 per member and challenge amount were approved.

The 2024 slate was presented by Audrey Estep, Gifts Discernment Chair. The slate was approved as presented. The next presenter was David Stauffer, Standing Committee member. His question was “How do Annual Conference activities affect our congregations?”

Other reports given were by Camp Sawatara, COBYS Family Services, the Historical Committee, Mission and Ministry CoB Denomination, Elizabethtown College, Eder Financial, Susquehanna Valley Ministry Center. All of these reports are in the conference booklet on the counter in the vestibule.

Recognition was given to Kay Weaver as she retires from service to the District. Passing of the gavel from David Nichols to the Moderator-Elect Kathy Brode closed the program. Some final statistics: attendance at the Friday night worship service was 102 in person, the service was also available virtually. Attendance at the Conference was 176 total, of which 111 were delegates, representing 46 congregations.

“This glorious hope revives our courage by the way; while each in expectation lives and waits to see the day.” Our hope is that the Church of the Brethren will continue to be a force for good now and for the next 300 years.

Lynne Allebach

10/29/2023 Hatfield Church of the Brethren