

Turn Around Task Team District Report 2006

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Turn Around Task Team District Report 2006

At the 1981 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren, a report was given addressing the decline of membership in the Church of the Brethren. A committee was assembled *1) to discover the basic reasons for the diminishing membership [of the Church of the Brethren] and 2) to propose specific recommendations for dealing with this problem.* This report can be found in its entirety on pages 215-234 of the 1981 Annual Conference Minutes.

In June 2005, the District Executive of the Atlantic Northeast (ANE) District of the Church of the Brethren, (Rev.) Craig Smith, assembled a Turn-Around Task Team (TATT) to look again at the continued decline in membership, this time of the ANE district over the course of the last three decades.

This is an initial report of the findings of the Turn-Around Task Team in regard to said decline in membership.

The above mentioned 1981 Annual Conference report is mentioned because it became a “ground zero” of information regarding the problem to which the TATT had been assigned. A basic summation of some of the critical information given therein is:

- The Church of the Brethren experienced significant and often rapid growth between the years 1850 and 1940
- Between 1940 and 1960, the rate of growth considerably slowed
- Between 1960 and 1979, membership began to decline at an average rate of -6.75%.
- Seven stated causes of the diminishing membership at that time:
 1. We are lacking in a warm, vital, personal relationship with, and commitment to, Christ
 2. We have lost a clear sense of purpose or reason for existence as a Church
 3. We have an incomplete and inadequate understanding of Christian discipleship
 4. The commission “to make disciples” is not a high priority for our church
 5. We do not have any plan or strategy as a church for faith sharing
 6. During the past two decades we have failed to continue establishing new congregations

7. We have failed to adequately respond to the convulsive change in our society and culture

An important statement in the 1981 report is: "...the primary reason for membership decline among Brethren seems to be that, while we have witnessed effectively through a strong social ministry, we have not witnessed as well for Christ with our words and in leading people to accept Him as Savior and Lord." (pg. 221)

These findings proved to be a vital launching point for the TATT. We saw no reason to "re-invent the wheel" so used this report as a launching pad of sorts from which to begin our discernment process.

Formulation Of Process

When the TATT was assembled, it formulated this purpose statement:
We exist to evaluate and address the decline in membership in the churches of the Atlantic Northeast District of Church of the Brethren by...

- i. holistically evaluating
- ii. spiritually discerning
- iii. honestly informing

the problem to which we have been assigned.

A Basic Assumption

A basic assumption with which the TATT began its journey is that decline in membership of ANE churches is indeed a problem, but not one of demographics, programming or scientifically measurable issues. The ANE decline in membership is a spiritual matter. As such, it must be treated spiritually, through a process of community-focused, Holy Spirit-led, biblically informed, prayerfully approached, worship-based evaluation and discernment.

The TATT has as its greatest desire “to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 2:11 *all Scripture quotations taken from New International Version*) Spiritual discernment can be a very subjective process, but the TATT believes that in community and through the illumination of the Spirit of God, He will speak to us what our churches need to hear. God will speak a message that edifies the church.

Process

Under this basic assumption, the TATT put together two surveys to be distributed to all the churches in the ANE, one survey to be given to a cross-section of members and another survey to be given to church leadership. The point of these surveys was to simply inform the TATT as to the current realities and perceptions with regard to membership patterns, vision, spiritual health patterns, suspected causes of decline in membership, felt factors of contributing to or detracting from congregational health, and positive or negative experiences in the Church of the Brethren.

The TATT also invited a cross-section of churches in the ANE district to discernment gatherings. These gatherings consisted of a time of worship and prayer, and interviews with local church leadership based on a tool of discernment created by the TATT. The tool and these gatherings were to inform, and create dialogue around the decline in membership of the ANE district with its local church leaders. The tool and gatherings focused dialogue around church attendance/membership patterns, basic understanding of local demographics, perceived spiritual health, vision, ownership of congregational vision, discipleship process, perceived needed changes, district support structures, and commendations or admonitions that God would have for these local churches. Each discernment gathering was concluded with a time of laying on of hands and prayer for local church leadership by the TATT. Response to these discernment gatherings by local church leadership was extremely positive. It was a great picture of community at work. We found many leaders to be starved for this kind of support and vested interest.

At the conclusion of the discernment process, the TATT reassembled for the purpose of overall discernment of the root issues facing ANE churches causing or contributing to a continued decline in church membership.

As a part of spiritual connection to the churches we were to be interviewing, the TATT began weekly praying for every church in the ANE district. Churches were divided between members of the team. Members called their churches to receive prayer concerns and then spent time in prayer for the assigned churches.

An academic reading of *Transforming Congregational Culture* by Anthony B. Robinson, research of well-respected Christian and secular periodicals, and Scripture study served to greatly inform the problem facing the ANE as well as provide the TATT with a common language with which to approach the problem.

One of the most important things the TATT team participated in was corporate worship at each of our gatherings. This time of worship fueled our connection with one another, and our corporate connection with God enabling us to speak prophetically to one another and the ANE district.

Formation of Report

Since we are seeking to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to the churches of the ANE, formation and flow of this report will loosely follow the model of the letters to the churches in Revelation two and three wherein the will of the Spirit is communicated to the churches. Affirmations of ministry will be followed by examination of root issues facing our churches.

The picture of the root system of a tree will be a guide in this report. As in a tree's root system, there are major roots and smaller roots. The smaller roots are often connected to a major root. We believe this allegory holds true to the root system of ANE churches and the ANE as a district.

It is important that the readers of this report understand these roots are expressed in their extreme form and by no means look this exaggerated or obvious in the common ANE church. The manifestations of these roots are as varied and diverse as the churches of the ANE.

Affirmations For The Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary (Rev. 2:2-3).

Our Lord's words to the church in Ephesus begin with affirmations of their deeds, hard work, and perseverance. As we attempt to give insight into how the Atlantic Northeast District Church of the Brethren moves from a present decline in membership towards greater numerical and spiritual growth, we too, desire to affirm deeds of faithfulness, hard work, and perseverance that are evident in our body life as Brethren. Following are three areas that were upheld in our discernment processes and of which we would strongly encourage continue in our life together.

Heart for service

Jesus makes it clear in the final days of His life on earth that it would be in the acts of serving that true followers could continue to see and know Him. In Matthew 25, Jesus counsels the disciples that in serving the least of these, we serve Him. Brethren of the Atlantic Northeast District have taken seriously the call to serve the least of these. Our discernment processes affirmed the large number of persons who are involved in mission and relief work both locally through their congregation and in their connection with the district and larger denomination. A major service effort of our district is the Disaster Relief Auction which has allowed thousands of dollars to be invested in helping those in need. Another instance where our district's heart for service can be seen is in connection to and support of COBYS which enables many foster children who may not otherwise experience a loving home environment, be placed and adopted into homes where Jesus is the center. The desire to emulate Jesus' ministry by addressing the physical concerns of those in need is a foundational

way that Brethren have expressed their faith. Continuing the work of service through acts that benefit society and seek justice will remain a faithful outgrowth of our thanks to God for His saving grace.

Heart for peacemaking

“For God so loved the world that He sent His only Son...” God’s act of coming to us in Jesus, of making peace with we who were separated from Him in our sin, is the basis of Christianity. Brethren have articulated this mission of God in Jesus into a theology of peace, hearing Jesus’ literal call in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) that true discipleship means making peace. Our discernment processes revealed that many in our churches desire to follow Jesus more fully in lives as peacemakers. It was affirmed in the discernment processes that Brethren of the Atlantic Northeast need to continue in the work of peace, witnessing to our understanding of Jesus as the Prince of Peace with current, visible acts of making peace. Such acts include, but are not limited to, our commitment to a ministry of reconciliation when interpersonal relationships become strained and calling on one another as well as governments to resolve conflicts in non-violent ways.

Heart to embody the simple truths of the New Testament

The first Brethren understood that faithful discipleship grows out of the commitment to study the life and ministry of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. A majority of what was shared with us through the discernment tool emphasized the church’s dedication to the Scriptures. As congregations gather around the Scriptures, reading for themselves within community, individual discipleship is strengthened by the knowledge of God’s will. Such sharing also increases discipleship because of caregiving, fellowship, and accountability that develops in Bible-study groups.

Brethren of the Atlantic Northeast district hold fast to practices of being the church which come directly from the New Testament; churches within the district continue to pursue the elemental, meaningful symbols of our understanding of

following the teachings and actions of Christ literally: Love Feast, Footwashing, Baptism, Bread and Cup Communion, and ministries of healing such as anointing. Many congregations shared with us the importance of having leadership that is rooted in the Scriptures to provide vision that is grounded in the teachings of the New Testament. This call for biblical leaders highlights the continued desire of the Brethren to be a people of the written word in order to exemplify the Living Word.

The Primary Root Issue Facing The Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren

The primary root issue to be addressed is this:

Lack of first love for Jesus breeding a culture of idolatry.

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 2:2-7).

There is one seminal and definitional root issue that the TATT has discerned leading to the decline in church membership: it is the loss of our first love, Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus commends the church at Ephesus for many things. They performed many good deeds, they worked hard, they were careful not to let any false leaders lead them astray, they protected doctrine, they made it through difficult circumstances – the parallels between the church in Ephesus and the Church of the Brethren are outstanding.

But Jesus still threatened to take away their lampstand for a singular reason: they had left their first love. They had fallen from the great height that God had intended for them because they no longer loved Jesus as they once did, now they love their work, their ministries, their programs. First love is a matter of priority. It is not that the church in Ephesus should not persevere or perform good deeds; it is the fact that they loved those things more than Jesus.

The TATT has discerned that this lack of first love of Jesus is the major root issue in our current decline in church membership. People come to church expecting to find Jesus, and they have every right to do so. When the loves of the church become skewed and Jesus is not loved above all else, the power and

focus of the church fails. The TATT believes that the churches in the ANE are in critical need of re-alignment of their loves. The following are some ways in which the TATT sees this lack of first love demonstrating itself.

- *Spiritual Arrogance:* There is a perceived and demonstrated arrogance in our churches that leads to the belief that the work of ministry can be carried out without strong connection to and dependence on Jesus. Many of the churches which submitted surveys and came to discernment gatherings voiced comparisons to one another as institutions more than comparisons to their ultimate calling in Christ. This perceived arrogance also shows up in a very works focused attitude: “we can get this done, or fix this problem if we just work hard enough”. Such arrogance quickly produces stubbornness that hinders a teachable spirit. There is openness by some to see the signs of illness and pending death for the district but increasingly there is a complete and utter unwillingness, on anyone’s part, to claim personal responsibility for these things. Many seem to feel that they know the answers if “the district” would just listen to them. Such banter clearly indicates that we are more interested in *being something* than *knowing someone*. Jesus is lost in our shuffle to prove and justify ourselves. His grace seems to be unneeded in our failure as a church because apparently no one is at fault. Since He can only emerge through grace at this point, and we don’t need that, then He has no entry point. However, to most of us that is okay. After all we don’t really need Him any more than we have Him. We are fine. The idol here is Pride.

Selfishness: The majority of the churches in the ANE, and almost every church from which the TATT received surveys, are currently engaged in conflict, many over styles of worship. The majority of discussion and remarks around this topic reeked of selfishness and

significantly lacked any undertones of true pursuit of God's desires or purposes. Where is our love for Jesus?

Many of these congregations are currently embroiled in conflict over church structure, process of discipleship, style of worship and method of congregational care. The resultant product is an all out clash of generational cultures. In this clash, a significant lack of selflessness that works through conflict for the sake of mission, resulting in unified, holistic ministry is woefully absent. The idol here is Personal Preferences

- *Programs Over Purpose:* The churches of the ANE are running themselves into the ground. ANE churches are so busy creating and maintaining programs, that Jesus as first love is not even a topic of conversation. Busy-ness has become a mantra for perceived spirituality. Leaders are those who will sell their souls for the well being of the programs instead of those who will sell the program for the sake of Jesus. While Jesus and His potential disciples are people and must therefore be approached relationally, we seem to have tried to worship, disciple and relate through program prior to conversation and relationship. It appears that these programs can be correlated to the shortcuts that Satan offered to Jesus in Luke 4. (That is, the ability to achieve certain ends without taking an appropriate path). In the end programs can completely deceive, not accomplishing what they promise, leaving the spiritually thirsty entirely dehydrated. Jesus is not sought because we are too busy serving His church. The idol here is Religiosity.
- *Misunderstanding Of Success:* Many of our churches are gauging their effectiveness by the size of their congregations, the health of their programs, the size and stewardship of their buildings and the perception of happiness among their members rather than on the call to love Jesus first. The pursuit of success is often justified

under the desire to give our best to doing the Lord's work. The idol here is Applause of Humans.

As stated, this root issue of lack of first love is definitional and seminal. The following secondary root issues are birthed by this first and primary root issue.

Secondary Root Issues Facing The Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren

Root Issue: *Lack of faith breeding a culture of distrust.*

He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty (Luke 17:6-10).

Most of the churches in the ANE district would read this passage in Luke and say, "But that's exactly who we are. We work hard and expect nothing for it." The question becomes, however: For what are we called to work?

1. We are to work hard for heart connection with Jesus.
2. We are to work hard in prayer.
3. We are to work hard in being quiet and still and hearing God's voice.
4. We are to work hard in fasting.
5. We are to work hard in loving Jesus first.

Historically, the Church of the Brethren is deeply tied to all these things because of its Pietistic foundations. The concern which emerged in each of the discernment processes of the TATT was a distinct and woeful lack of these things in the churches of the ANE.

The passage in Luke begins with faith the size of a mustard seed that births mighty miracles and work because of who the Master is, not because of the work of the servant. A lack of faith in ANE churches has led us to a "we can just get it done" attitude. Such a mindset says, "Here's a problem. If we work hard enough and create programs well enough, we can fix it."

Such an overarching posture breeds a culture of distrust. A culture of distrust stems from this "we can fix it, we can program it" mindset because it becomes about human solutions to perceived problems. The culture of distrust

breeds the pushing of individual agendas within the congregational body which breeds division, which breeds distrust. No community can consider itself alive and well if it is divided. This division showed itself consistently in suppressed criticism.

The passage is clear that we do not receive blessing proportionate to our labor. Labor is simply obedience. Lack of obedience deserves judgment. Our faithful hard work is good and it is necessary. It is a mandate. However our power in effective ministry does not come from the labor. Our power comes when we stand in belief of the power of God. We should faithfully work, but not depend on our work for the success of the kingdom. **The lack of passion and priority given to intercession as a central ministry in the majority of churches we surveyed and interviewed is a clear indication that faith is not our starting point in ministry.**

The question is not, "Are we working?" The questions are: "For what are we working and for whom?" and "Where is faith in all these things?"

The idol here is Independent Control (self-reliance) rooted in Pride.

Root Issue: *Lack of a culture of transformation breeding a culture of maintaining the status quo.*

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her (Luke 10:38-42).

Making dinner when we could be sitting at Jesus' feet is *status quo*. Serving, maintaining, and keeping churches going is not at all the call that God has issued to His people. God desires our first love be for Him, not His work. When we serve, we do so out of an overflow of love and heart connection to

Jesus, and we do so for love of who He is; Jesus must be loved first. When the church is loved well, Jesus is loved well. But He must be loved first.

What is missed when we maintain the status quo? We miss the transforming words of Christ. By not sitting at His feet and hearing His heart, it is impossible for us to know how to be changed to be more like Him. And so, we keep doing the things we have always done. If we do what we have always done, we will be who we have always been. Transformation is a life-long process and our churches are divorcing themselves from being transformed because they are too busy, like Martha, making dinner.

We may at times change the recipes that we make by watching others' new found creativity, but we rarely have our own unique creativity birthed out of our time at the feet of Jesus. We are often afraid to take the time to be at His feet because we feel that He is pleased with us as we work. We substitute our work for His work on the cross as the means by which we may approach him without shame. We can be caught in a cycle of always attempting to please Him and never actually approaching him. This is birthed from the prior roots. We lack faith that we can rest and love to pursue rest in Him.

The idol here is Security and Noise (a preoccupation with the seemingly important to drown out the feeling of shame).

Root Issue: *Lack of biblical leadership breeding a culture of confusion and chaos*

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Leadership throughout the Bible was the unmistakable way that God would speak to His people. In the church, the five gifts listed in Ephesians 4 are the keys to the equipping of the saints. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors

and teachers are called to hear God's voice and move in God's Spirit to see the community of Jesus grow to maturity.

Our discernment process has uncovered an apparent lack of biblical leadership in the following ways:

- Willingness to tolerate conflicted relationships within the body at the expense of truth under the guise of the "greater good". The TATT discovered that, in order to maintain a level of comfort in relationships, there is an unwillingness to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). When truth is sacrificed, deep Christian relationships are hindered and generally result in an inauthentic connection between the members of the body.
- Willingness to place leaders in leadership positions who are not called or equipped for that ministry, resulting in leaders with little confidence, strength or credibility to obey God's mission and impart His revealed vision.
- Willingness to be satisfied with *status quo*, and even call out leaders who will maintain the *status quo* rather than set vision and pursue mission.
- Lack of definition and parameters for equipping leadership for both leaders and congregations resulting in confusion.
- Democratic organizational structures that bow to the political and often selfish will of the community (congregational members, often displaying a significant lack of concern for the desires of God compared to their own desires) rather than reliance on visionary, called leadership (who has shown through their character to hold the desires of God at the center of their will) to name the vision and mission for the body. A resulting environment where innovators and entrepreneurs are stifled in both the work of the congregation and the role of the leader.
- Lack of mutual submission whereby leaders are respected, followed and held accountable, as is the congregation at large.

Lack of mutual submission results in suspicion on the part of the congregation and distances leaders from the flock that they are called to shepherd.

- Lack of ministry birthed by apostolic leaders (church planting and regional networking).
- Lack of unique lay ministry being birthed, guided, and supported in and out of local congregations. This reveals a lack of equipping, inspiring, and empowering leadership.

One pastor stated it this way: “As a pastor, I feel like I am rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. It is not a specific issue, but rather a culture of church that will not acknowledge its situation – too little, too late.” This mentality is powerlessness, lacking any significant influence or ability to implement vision or change. Ministerial Leadership who come to such a point begin to serve out of duty, lacking joy, and finally conclude to “go down with the ship” rather than save it.

In 2 Kings 20:12-19, the story is told of King Hezekiah who received messengers from the Babylonian government and in his pride, took these emissaries on a tour of his vast riches, palaces, and cities. He showed them the whole kingdom. The prophet Isaiah came to him and asked what he had done. When Hezekiah reported the truth, Isaiah proclaimed the coming Babylonian captivity, a captivity that included many of Hezekiah’s own children being carried off to Babylon and being made eunuchs in the courts of Babylon. Hezekiah should have fallen on his face in repentance, dressed in burlap, poured ashes on his head and called for a nationwide fast that God would have mercy on his terrible leadership decision. Instead Hezekiah said this:

“The word of the Lord you have spoken is good,” Hezekiah replied. For he thought, “Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?”

-- 2 Kings 20:19

Like Hezekiah, church leadership should not enjoy tenures in churches where the focus is to appease congregations without considering the spiritual

legacy we are leaving future generations. Visionary leadership must have such a first love for Jesus that it completely leads their heart to a sacrificial passion to see that love passed on to the emerging generations no matter the cost to the relationship with the peers.

The idol here is Fear and Control (afraid to follow, afraid to lead).

Root Issue: *Lack of identity breeding a culture of superficiality*

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

*‘See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.*

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

*‘The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone,’*

and,

*‘A stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.’*

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also for what they were destined. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:4-10).

The whole story of God is of one who comes to His people. In Jesus, God came to earth to “dwell among us”. As God’s saints we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The people of God are not called to build buildings, develop programs, form committees, have meetings – we are not first called to do anything. We are first called to be a people. Churches of the ANE are so busy doing that they have no time for being. Prayer is woefully neglected. Community conversations are superficial. Programs have become the foundation of our faith instead of Jesus, the cornerstone.

God wants to dwell with His people, not chase after them or wait for them to finish the dinner preparations before sitting at His feet. There will always be more things to do, and there is a good possibility that none of these things need to be done at all. Our purpose in 1 Peter is obvious, we belong to God in order to worship Him. Worship takes time, silence, and priority in our daily schedules.

A lack of finding our identity in Christ allows superficial deceptions to creep into our existence and negate our status as a holy priesthood. This also affects our understanding of how to love Jesus because we do not know who we are.

The idol here is Spiritual Laziness (lack of honest spiritual introspection).

Root Issue: *Lack of kingdom mindset breeding a culture of conflict.*

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward (Mark 9:38-41)."

Through the TATT discernment process, it became obvious that ANE churches are issue-centric rather than Christo-centric. This is primarily evidenced through:

- Division over social issues
- Division over worship forms
- Division over political workings
- Lack of regional partnerships

Unity in ANE churches is often wrongly defined as conformity, uniformity or unanimity. Unity, however, should connote an existing and working as one despite, or even because of, our differences. When unity becomes anything else the result is an air of agenda-pushing. We try to define ourselves by our differences rather than our reliance on Christ. Our roles are no longer clearly defined within the greater kingdom because there is a lack of mutual submission to one another in the love of Jesus. Rather, we must make up for all of the slack

that is missing from the non-existent kingdom relationships. We move to a level of critique that compares how important our “body” is verses another. We become lame and blind.

The disciples in Mark 9 were upset because someone was exhibiting power in Jesus name, but not according to their own agenda. In their estimation, this man did not “belong.” Therefore he could not have power. Rather than regarding the overarching plan and power of the Kingdom of Heaven, they regarded themselves “more highly than they ought.”

Churches in the ANE district are divided on many issues, but none more so than worship forms. Church leadership seeks roads of appeasing personal tastes rather than hearing God’s voice and “making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Fans of traditional music are saying that contemporary worship cannot be good because it is not according to their agenda. The same is true of fans of contemporary worship. This works against the Kingdom.

Churches in the ANE district exhibited little to no participation, fellowship or partnership with churches in their regions. For the most part, ANE churches stand alone protecting their programs and structures, oftentimes too busy with internal conflict or internal programming to make time for regional partnerships for the sake of the Kingdom.

It has been abundantly clear that the majority of ANE congregations have historically been desirous of being “unique” in the kingdom. It has been a matter of identity to be distinguished from the rest of the kingdom. While there has not been a harsh judgment openly thrown at other Christian movements there has been a significant lack of pursuit in partnership. There is again an underlying spiritual arrogance and laziness that believes that we are uniquely special. We have a corner of truth that no one else does and we will identify ourselves by the separation. While we may not follow Apollos or Paul we do have our relief work, peace stance, and non-creedal position that we use to keep ourselves aloof and at bay from the rest of the regional Christian community.

While many of our churches now have individuals pushing hard to make the churches look like every other church in the community, we have very few who are willing to know and keep our unique calling within the kingdom while making every effort to be in full working partnership and true unity with the regional Christian community in which they are.

The idol here is Fear of Man (image, identity based in perception of uniqueness).

Primary Response: Confession and Repentance

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 2:2-7).

If the primary root issue to be addressed is the loss of first love as referenced in Revelation 2, then our only choice is to begin with confession and repentance, because that is what Jesus tells the Ephesian church to do. It is important for the churches of the ANE to understand that to not repent is to choose against loving Jesus first. What is worse, on the heels of a refusal to repent comes the judgment of Jesus who will “remove your lampstand from its place.” When repentance is had and a return to first love is made, then the Ephesian church is told to do something: “do the things you did at first”, but that doing comes only as we are being lovers of Jesus first.

Understanding Confession

But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers—their treachery against me and their hostility toward me, which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land (Leviticus 26:40-42).

Confession needs to be taken down from a sacramental understanding and restored to its proper place in the church. Confession is not a hoop to jump through on the heels of sin in order to “make things right”. Confession is an emotional and spiritual awareness of broken fellowship committed by the people of God. In confession, we open again the doors to our hearts and minds that we chose to close because of our pride and desire to operate apart from God.

Confession is not wallowing in guilt and self-effacement, the nuance carried in the word confession is “to see the same as”, and it is to be sorry for the separation we have caused. We simply need to recognize, personally and corporately, the reality of the situation we have chosen.

Confession in the churches of the ANE will be difficultly had because of the nature of the confession to which we are called. Confession necessitates humility. Speaking words of confession requires phrases such as, “I was wrong”, “I am sorry”, “It should not have been this way”. It is bold-faced ownership of the wrongs committed against God.

I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin (Psalm 38:18).

Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"— and You forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:5).

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge (Psalm 51:3,4).

The major issue being dealt with in this paper is the spiritual pride and arrogance on the part of the ANE district stemming from a lack of first love. Confession requires humility and this root of pride will not be easily moved. Furthermore, our “we can get it done” attitude could prevent us from truly engaging in confession and simply looking to fix a perceived problem.

As a district, confession is the first step in moving toward a return to first love and creation of other cultures in our churches. We must acknowledge, personally and corporately, the places we have shut Jesus out and idols we erected in His place. We need to own the break in fellowship we have chosen, see the rift in our relationship with Jesus for what it is, and allow ourselves to feel the sorrow of consequences of our decisions.

2 Samuel 24 relays the story of David when he decided to take a census of all the people in Israel. Warned by his advisor Joab against such a thing, David continued with his plan to number the people. The numbers were tallied and the sums reported, and then David realized the pride in his actions. “David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to

the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing (2 Samuel 24:10).'" In response David's confession, God offers three options to David:

1. Seven years of famine in Israel
2. Three months of fleeing from David's enemies
3. Three days of plague among the people

David chooses the plague assuming that it is better to fall into the hands of God than the hand of his enemies. The plague kills 70,000 Israelites.

Taking a census of the people was not necessarily a wrong action, what was wrong was David's underlying attitude in taking the census as well as an ignoring of his counselor's advice. Confession did not make things easier for David, in fact, things got much worse. The point of David's confession was not to appease God and offer some kind of sacrifice that would get him off the hook like King Saul often tried. David confessed simply because things were not right between he and God, and he was willing to risk whatever needed to be risked in order to restore that primary relationship.

Terry Muck, in his book Liberating The Leader's Prayer Life, says of this confession of David:

"Why did God punish David's sin so severely? Perhaps he did not want confession confused with appeasement—confession does not mean we're off the hook. Confession does not make things easier for us. Confession does not make God look the other way about our sin. Confession does not absolve us of our responsibility. Confession prepares us for conversation with God and acceptance of his forgiveness, his terms, his sovereignty. (quoted in Christianity Today online archives, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/5547>)

Confession is a wonderful opportunity to receive cleansing from sin and removal of the weight that was brought on by the sin. Just as beautiful is the assured forgiveness of our Father. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)."

Understanding Repentance

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place (Revelation 2:4,5).

The Hebrew usage of the word repentance, *shub*, denotes a change of paths, a shift from the wrong path to the right path. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, is a compound word. *Meta*, a preposition with many usages, denotes transformation in *metanoia*. While *metamorphosis* would mean “change of shape”, *metanoia* denotes a change of the “*nous*”, the innermost consciousness. Repentance is not self-loathing, guilt-tripping or babbling. Repentance is insight. (Frederica Matthews-Greene, *Whatever Happened to Repentance?*, Christianity Today February 4, 2002, Vol. 46, No. 2, Page 56)

Repentance is recognition that God planned for things to be one way, we subsequently chose another way, and we are now exercising an act of our wills that returns us to a proper submission and authority structure under God. This act of the will overflows into our realms of spirit and emotion, changing us in the deepest parts of who we are.

Repentance is a natural part of the process called transformation. When Jesus came to earth, He came declaring a “gospel of repentance”. John the Baptist declared, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Peter at Pentecost proclaimed, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins!” Multiple calls to repentance and definitive moments of returning to the proper path are foundational aspects to a walk with Jesus.

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. So

even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged (2 Corinthians 7:8-13a).

Repentance, while taking form as an act of the will, touches the emotions deeply. Godly sorrow leads to repentance. We are emotionally tied to and sorrowful of the decline in membership of our churches. But why are we sorrowful?

Because our pews are not full?

Because we are not meeting our church or district budgets?

Because our programs are empty perpetuations of the emptiness in our collective soul?

Because there are not enough people to proclaim pacifism, social justice or simplicity of life?

Or are we sorrowful because while we are busy doing church we are missing Jesus? Godly sorrow over our idolatry and lack of first love will lead us to the crucial point of choosing a return to Jesus and a re-establishment of His authority.

There are two sober warnings in this call to repentance by the part of the churches of the ANE.

1. We are spiritually arrogant and have stepped away from the path of submission to God's authority. This call to repentance is a call to realign the very depths of who we are in Christ and place ourselves again under His authority.
2. We believe we can work hard enough to fix existing problems and a problem has been pinpointed: lack of Jesus as first love. The danger here is for us to say, "OK, we're off track. What do we need to do? Give me steps to follow so we can do it and fix this problem."

This is not a problem to fix, this is a relationship to be reconciled. Reconciliation begins with purposeful, honest communication.

A Call to Prayer that Seeks God's Face

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land (2 Corinthians 7:14).

To seek God's face implies a desire for intimacy. If the churches of the ANE have moved from their first love and turned to other loves, seeking God's face must be a priority in times of prayer. Those who saw God's glory in Scripture are few and far between, naming a few: Adam and Eve, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, & John. These persons possessed an incredibly intimate relationship with God the Father. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in the cool of the evening. Moses spoke to God "as a man speaks to his friend". Isaiah is known as the chief of prophets in the Tanach. Jesus experienced the audible favor of God at His baptism as well as the Mount of Transfiguration experience. Paul was taken up into the third heaven and witnessed things of the glory of God of which he was not permitted to speak. John, to whose experience we owe the format of this letter, was referred to as the beloved disciple and had the privilege of this wonderful encounter while on Patmos.

We have become addicted to these other loves (the before-mentioned idols linked to the root and secondary issues), these idols that we love before Jesus. One of the greatest obstacles we will face on this path to reconciliation and restoration is the desire to "fix" what is broken. This problem was created over the course of decades, and will not be undone by a simple prayer meeting and a written resolution.

We need to fall in love with Jesus all over again. That requires removal of all the idols. In the Old Testament, the mandate was clear and simple: destroy the idols. If programs have taken the place of Jesus, then the programs have to be abandoned. If confidence in our institutions and ourselves has replaced our need for faith, then the institution has to be completely deconstructed. If styles of worship and church business are more a priority at ministry team meetings than prayer and building relationship with Jesus, then these things must be removed until first love is restored. If we are gauging our success by numbers and

budgets rather than connection to Christ and expansion of the Kingdom, then a sinful definition of success has to be destroyed. Replace all these things with quietness, prayer, worship and utter humility that says, “We have been so wrong for so long that we do not have a clue what to do or how to be. Speak, Lord, we will obey.”

A Call to Intercessory Prayer

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none (Ezekiel 22:30).

As we walk through a season of repentance, the only tangible work that we can begin to do is the work of intercession, whereby we ask the Lord to bring others along with us through this time of repentance.

Summation

We have lost our love of the game and have gained a fear of failure. We have seen the growth of many other movements (Mega-churches, emergent churches...) and have learned how to criticize and/or copy them. We understand that they have made some grave mistakes. But we, unlike them, have stopped playing the game. We are afraid to make mistakes. We assure ourselves by finding ways to set ourselves apart from the rest. We are pretenders. We define ourselves by the game. We define ourselves by the game plans, the uniforms, the players, the schedule, the philosophy of play, and by our adherents to both the written laws and the spirit of sportsmanship. We can talk about the game with the best of them. We can predict what should be done in every situation. It is in that knowledge that we define ourselves, but we have lost our ability to truly engage in the game. Somewhere along the line we saw some “impressive players” that we allowed define success for us. The scoreboard and the statistics became of primary importance. Because of this, we were intimidated and lost our love for the game. Not only did we become uneasy on the field, we started a self-perpetuating and self-defeating cycle. We defined ourselves by the statistics and were unable to produce those statistics because of our uneasiness on the field spawned by our lack of love for the game. We took our eyes off the true prize.

It is now on us to return the playground where we first developed our love for the game. We must leave the playing field with its statistics and its impressive players. We must again be children who learn to fall in love and re-discover the reasons why we first began to play. In this time we will also re-discover our unique gifting within this game. It is imperative that we do not return to the playing field until we are released by our Father to do so.

Appendix A Church Member and Leadership Surveys

Church Member Survey

The Atlantic Northeast District Turn Around Team exists to evaluate and address the decline in membership of the Atlantic Northeast District Church of the Brethren congregations by...

- Holistically Evaluating
- Spiritually discerning
- Honestly informing

In order to holistically evaluate our current membership situation, we ask that you fill out this brief survey about your experience with the Church of the Brethren.

Congregation: _____

Your age:

- Under 16
 Ages 16-25
 Ages 26-35
 Ages 36-45
 Ages 46-55
 Over 55

The membership in our congregation has:

- Been on the decline
 Remained steady
 Been increasing

What expectations do you have for your church?

What qualities do you look for in a church?

I am:

- Very active in my church
 Somewhat active in my church
 Not active in my church

What about your congregation keeps you going back?

What attractive qualities do other churches have that your congregation may lack?

What is one thing you would change about your church?

Has your congregation aided in your spiritual growth?

- Yes
 No

Please explain:

* Spaces have been removed for this report.

Church Leadership Survey

The Atlantic Northeast District Turn Around Team exists to evaluate and address the decline in membership of the Atlantic Northeast District Church of the Brethren congregations by...

- Holistically Evaluating
- Spiritually discerning
- Honestly informing

In order to holistically evaluate our current membership situation, we ask that you fill out this brief survey about your experience with the Church of the Brethren.

Congregation: _____ **Role:** _____

The church has been in existence for _____ years.

The largest age group in our congregation is:

_____ Under 16	_____ Ages 36-45
_____ Ages 16-25	_____ Ages 46-55
_____ Ages 26-35	_____ Over 55

Total membership for our congregation is _____ members

The membership in our congregation has:

_____ Been on the decline	_____ Remained steady
_____ Been increasing	_____ Other (please explain)

Please describe your congregation's membership patterns.

Please describe your congregation's spiritual health patterns.

Please list any special materials or curriculum you have used (ex. Purpose Driven Life).

Are you aware of and concerned with the decline in church membership?

_____ Yes
_____ No

Please list any suspected causes you have for the decline in membership.

What vision do you have for your congregation?

What factors do you believe contribute to a healthy, growing church?

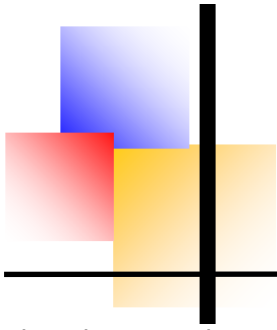
What factors afflict your congregational health?

Please reflect on your positive experiences within the Church of the Brethren.

Please reflect on your negative experiences within the Church of the Brethren.

***Spaces have been removed for this report.**

Appendix B



Atlantic-Northeast District Church of the Brethren
Turn-Around Team

Church Discernment Tool

The Atlantic-Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren has assembled a Turn-Around Team to evaluate and address the decline in membership of Atlantic Northeast District Church of the Brethren congregations by holistically evaluating, spiritually discerning, and honestly informing congregational and district life. This information serves as a discernment tool to help us gather information about the churches in our district from a local church leadership perspective. Please take some time to complete these questions and bring it with you to your discernment gathering. Thank you for your help.

Church Name: _____ Pastor's Name: _____

Person filling out this survey: _____

Church Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Church Phone: _____ Church Fax: _____ Church Website: _____

Did you receive the Turn-Around team surveys? Yes No

Do you have any questions, thoughts or comments about them?

How many people are presently in attendance in your congregation? _____

How many people were in attendance one year ago? _____

How many people were in attendance five years ago? _____

How many people were in attendance ten years ago? _____

Please give a brief demographic description of your congregation (address issues such as age, race, gender, economic standing, religious background, etc).

Please give a brief demographic description of the geographic area (ten mile radius) in which your church rests (address issues such as age, race, gender, economic standing, religious background, etc).

Which of the following words would describe your congregation. (Check all that apply)

- | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Old | <input type="checkbox"/> Missions-minded | <input type="checkbox"/> Small Groups | <input type="checkbox"/> Board-driven | <input type="checkbox"/> Growing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Young | <input type="checkbox"/> Boring | <input type="checkbox"/> Children's Ministry | <input type="checkbox"/> Out of Touch | <input type="checkbox"/> Closed to new people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vibrant | <input type="checkbox"/> Warm | <input type="checkbox"/> Youth Ministry | <input type="checkbox"/> Open and Safe | <input type="checkbox"/> Inviting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Exciting worship | <input type="checkbox"/> Family | <input type="checkbox"/> Changing | <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inward growing | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong Teaching | <input type="checkbox"/> Stagnant | <input type="checkbox"/> Local | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mature disciples | <input type="checkbox"/> Sin in the Camp | <input type="checkbox"/> Strong Leadership | <input type="checkbox"/> Commuters | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outreach-focused | <input type="checkbox"/> Weak Leadership | <input type="checkbox"/> Pastor-Driven | <input type="checkbox"/> Needy of Change | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dying | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotionally Engaged | <input type="checkbox"/> Stubborn Sheep | <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant | |

How do you feel about the spiritual health of your congregation?

What is your vision for the church?

Do your leadership teams share this vision? If not, why not?

Does the congregation share this vision? If not, why not?

Do you feel your people are deeper disciples than they were one year ago? If so, why? If not, why not?

Do you feel your people are deeper disciples than they were three years ago? If so, why? If not, why not?

Do you feel your people are deeper disciples than they were five years ago? If so, why? If not, why not?

If there was one thing you would never change about your church, what would it be?

If there was one thing you could change about your church right now, what would it be?

How can the district better support the overall health of your church?

When God looks at your congregation, what commendations does He offer?

When God looks at your church, what warnings and admonitions does He bring?

Can we pray with you in pursuit of these words from God? How should we pray?

Appendix C ANE Membership Records

Year	Membership #	Loss/Gain	Ave. Attendance
1979	18,077	+64	
1980	17,946	-131	
1981	17,935	-11	
1982	17,782	-153	
1983	17,170	-612	
1984	17,095	-75	
1985	16,855	-240	
1986	16,770	-85	
1987	16,596	-174	
1988	16,472	-124	
1989	16,304	-168	
1990	16,152	-152	162 (per congregation)
1991	16,339	+187	156 (per congregation)
1992	16,368	+29	175 (per congregation)
1993	16,101	-267	11,153 (district)
1994	15,960	-141	11,219 (district)
1995	16,151	+191	11,358 (district)
1996	16,230	+79	11,035 (district)
1997	15,946	-205	11,611 (district)
1998	16,082	+136	11,439 (district)
1999	16,155	+73	11,154 (district)
2000	15,954	-201	11,556 (district)
2001	15,792	-162	11,578 (district)
2002	15,591	-101	11,223 (district)
2003	15,575	-16	10,669 (district)
2004	15,348	-221	10,674 (district)
2005	15,166	-182	10,471 (district)

Turn Around Task Team Members

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