

Moderator's Explanation of the 2011 Annual Conference Theme

VISION:

I envision Annual Conference 2011 to be an occasion with multiple opportunities for inspiration, discernment, fellowship, learning, challenge, service, and more for the gathered delegates, members, and friends of the Church of the Brethren—centered in Jesus Christ who is Lord of the church and Savior of humankind.

THEME:

In considering what theme would serve this vision for Annual Conference 2011, several possibilities flowed through my soul. I want the theme to be centered in Jesus Christ and to flow from the Gospels. I also want it to be simple enough for almost anyone to grasp, broad enough to keep us centered in the big picture, specific enough to challenge our vision together, and sensitive enough to be in touch with current Brethren life.

This journey brought me to the phrase *Gifted with Promise: Extending Jesus' Table*. Time and again this past year as I have participated in Brethren gatherings (NOAC, Intercultural Conference, New Church Planting Conference, Mission & Ministry Board, and others) and as I have heard calls for response to diminishing membership and to the church's mission, the latter phrase has resonated in my soul. Later, the first phrase emerged to center the extending, especially as I considered how Acts 2:39 and I John 2:25 highlight the gift of God's promise. When I have prayed for whether another theme might emerge, my heart kept returning to *Gifted with Promise: Extending Jesus' Table*.

As a primary text for this theme, I have chosen the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. This story is one of few to appear in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; and John 6:1-14). Mark (8:1-10) and Matthew (15:32-39) add a feeding of 4,000. In the story, Jesus' disciples request him to send the crowds away to be fed. Jesus responds by challenging the disciples: "You give them something to eat" (Matthew 14:16). In every age including our own, Jesus continues to challenge disciples to respond to people with the sustaining benefit of the Gospel whether in compassionate service, forgiving grace, or abiding hope.

In *Gifted with Promise: Extending Jesus' Table*, Brethren encounter a challenging assignment: (1) to discover afresh their giftedness with Gospel and (2) to envision their role in loving the world enough to share the physical and spiritual benefit of the Gospel. This theme connects our common interests in spirituality and service, practice and prayer. We extend the table with promised resources of grace and love. The theme calls us to mission and evangelism where we not only share and invite but we cultivate discipleship as we offer tangible resources of food, clothing, medical care, and more. At the table, we share, we receive, and we learn.

I envision worship, Bible studies, reports, and other aspects of the 2011 Annual Conference all centered around this theme: *Gifted with Promise: Extending Jesus' Table*.

Robert E. Alley, September 2010

Explanation of the Conference Logo ***by Darin Keith Bowman, 2011 logo designer***

"The expanding cloth logo concept depicts the feeding of the 5,000 at its essence. The elements themselves represent the promise of a coming miracle that is beyond belief. The table surface is a cloth that expands as it transforms literally and figuratively into a dove. This present and future expansion is initiated by the Spirit and carried out by the faithful. The overhead view invites us to find our place at the table. The figures around the table represent different aspects of our faith journey, inviting (maroon), receiving (orange), and teaching (green). The different colors of the figures also give the logo an intercultural dimension. Finally, where two or three are gathered, we are certain of God's presence. The logo can serve as a visual reminder that we can make shared experiences around the table so much more than just physical nourishment."

*Darin Keith Bowman
Bridgewater, VA*

Further information on the Conference Theme:

The Conference theme is developed around the visual image of a extension table where more leaves are added as guests increase. We have experienced this personally as a family. Some extension tables add as many as a dozen or more leaves so as to accommodate all the guests or family that may be present. When someone encounters the stories of Jesus, he/she finds Him extending the table of God's love by including and extending beyond those who may already see themselves as part of God's family.

Another part of the image of the Conference theme emerges from Brethren being a people of the table. The very heart of our liturgy found in Love Feast identifies us as a people of the table. Our interest in the compassion of Jesus draws us to the imagery of table where we gather together to share, to challenge, to learn, and to support one another.

The theme is basically one of hospitality in various formats--an invitational hospitality as well as a discipling hospitality that asks what it means to share Jesus' table.

Saturday's worship will initiate the theme with focus on the giftedness in promise and hope. In Jesus, God gifts humankind with love and grace, forgiveness and empowerment, life that is abundant and eternal. Scriptures like Acts. 2:39 and I John 2: 25 highlight this giftedness. Old Testament prophets envision God's extending table as in the vision of new creation in Isaiah 65:17-25. The New Testament envisions the future with the blessing of Jesus' table as in the marriage feast of the lamb in Revelation 19:5-9. In Isaiah 55, the prophet invites everyone to live into a larger story—extending the table of God's love and grace. The promise of abundant life is for more than us and our kind. It is a bigger story with an extending table. The Church of the Brethren is already engaged in this theme. We will both celebrate the engagement and be

attentive to how God continues to guide our assignment with promise: “You give them something to eat.”

The daily scriptures and foci seek to accentuate various aspects of being *Gifted with Promise: Extending Jesus’ Table*. In each case, those preparing the message and those planning the worship must ask: How does this particular scripture enlighten the theme of Conference?

THEME SONG: “Praise, I will praise you Lord”

WORSHIP SERVICES:

Saturday: Preacher: Robert Alley Worship Leader: Tim Harvey

Opening Focus from the Conference Theme:
“Gifted With Promise: Extending Jesus’ Table”

Theme Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

Possible Special Features: Presentation of comforters & kits during the worship.
After the sermon: Sharing of Bread.

Focus: I will interpret the theme overall, highlight how we already live out the theme, and invite us into engagement with promise (hope) and opportunity (table). The message will be a mix of “state of the church” (assigned to the moderator) and casting vision that embraces our diversity while we share in extending Jesus’ table.

Sunday: (Intended to be planned as a fairly traditional service)
Preacher: Craig Smith Worship Leaders: Joel & Linetta Ballew

Daily Focus from the Conference Theme:
Jesus extends the table in the midst of domestic life.

Daily Scripture: John 2:1-12

Theme Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

Focus: In the wedding at Cana, Jesus attends a common domestic event (a wedding feast). There he is challenged to support the role of host in responding to the crisis when the wine is used up. The Gospel focus is on Jesus as the “new wine”; this is the first of 7 signs in John’s Gospel. I see this story as enlightening the Conference theme with the center place of Jesus in our domestic church life. He is the host with new wine, giver of abundant life. As church and congregations, we draw our sustenance from him. When our planning and efforts

give out, Jesus is present to replenish our strength, our vision, our hope, our promise. Jesus keeps the party going! He provides more than enough and the best. So how is Jesus present to us creating and extending the table for us? How is Jesus the ferment of new life for us?

Monday: Preacher: Samuel Saripiya Worship Leader: Nate Polzin

Daily Focus from the Conference Theme:

Jesus extends the table by accepting the hospitality of others.

Daily Scripture: Luke 7:36-8:3

Theme Scripture: Mark 8:1-10 (Feeding of the 4,000)

Focus: In the supper at Simon's house, Jesus encounters the hospitality of 2 people: Simon who is the host and an unnamed woman who washes Jesus' feet and anoints them with ointment. In both cases, Jesus accepts their hospitality, even though he recognizes the deficiency of Simon's hospitality. The focus for using this story in relationship to the Conference theme is in Jesus' willingness to accept the hospitality which others give Him. Simon is a religious leader, recognized as an outstanding person in the religious system where Jesus finds Himself. Jesus does not deny fellowship with him. However, the woman who washes Jesus' feet is of a different character. Discerning the nature of both Simon and the woman needs to be developed significantly to enlighten the daily focus. For some reason, the woman wasn't kept out; why? I would caution that we not be too hard on Simon. The focus is on Jesus and his receptivity to the hospitality or lack thereof from others. Another part of the story emerges in how Jesus' receptivity to the woman's hospitality brings forgiveness to her. Jesus gave the woman promise; He accepted the hospitality of the religious system but He challenged its neglect of its own rules of hospitality. So we must ask: How do we as church and as congregations receive the hospitality of others, even when we recognize deficiency or extraordinary behavior in that hospitality? This focus is of particular relevance in our intercultural connections. How do we receive the hospitality of those from other cultures?

Tuesday: Preacher: Dava Hensley Worship Leader: Pete Kontra

Daily Focus from the Conference Theme:

Jesus extends the table beyond our own kind and our own community.

Daily Scripture: Luke 14:12-14

Theme Scripture: Luke 9:10-17

Focus: This daily scripture is set in the midst of two other important sections of scripture, both of which enlighten it. Preceding this scripture, Jesus stresses humility in the midst of hospitality. Following this scripture, Jesus gives the parable of the great banquet which both extends the table and chastises those who refuse the table. I have chosen to not use this

whole section (Luke 14:7-24) and have given focus to the middle section that accentuates a hospitality for more than our own kind. We choose friends, but Jesus challenges us to move beyond those we choose to a hospitality for those we may not choose. How do we as church and as congregations bring the hospitality of God to those who may be unlike ourselves? I really think the list can be expanded to others beyond those Jesus mentions, as persons who may be different from us in education, economics, mental capacity, culture, theology, etc. This would include persons with disabilities and those with brokenness in their lives.

Wednesday: Preacher: Stan Noffsinger

Worship Leader: Rhonda Pittman Gingrich

Daily Focus from the Conference Theme: Jesus extends the table to us.

Daily Scripture: John 21:9-14

Theme Scripture: John 6:1-14

Focus: This scripture is one of the post-resurrection stories. In it, Jesus is clearly the host. He invites the disciples to have breakfast amidst their fishing expedition. This story reveals the risen Christ in our midst inviting us to the table nourishing us for the journey and celebrating with us as we extend His table. How do we as church and congregations receive Jesus' hospitality that welcomes and receives at the table and how do we let the extending lead us to celebrate promise?