

Annual Conference 2026 — A Report to the Congregation

Delegates: Ben Youtz and Shawn O'Brien

What Annual Conference Is

The Church of the Brethren is not a single church. It's a denomination, a family of roughly 800 congregations across the United States and Puerto Rico, connected by shared history, shared belief, and shared mission. West Green Tree is one of those congregations. Once a year, the whole denomination gathers in one place for what's called Annual Conference, a week of worship and decision-making where the church discerns, together, how to move forward. This year it was held Sunday, June 28, through Thursday, July 2, at the Grand Wayne Convention Center in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Every congregation sends delegates, people chosen from within the local church to carry its voice and cast its vote. This year, we represented West Green Tree together.

Annual Conference isn't a political convention, and it isn't run like one. A former Annual Conference Secretary and Moderator, Bill Eberly, described it this way: *it's not a place for predetermined positions to be debated the way a secular legislature debates them. It's a setting where people gather to consider the questions before the church and to seek the will of God through prayerful debate and the study of scripture.*

Who Was There

This year's Conference drew 1,812 people total: 389 delegates carrying votes for their congregations, 1,270 nondelegates attending in person, and 153 attending virtually.

How Leadership Works

It's worth understanding something structural here, because it shapes how everything else in this report should be read. Nobody at Annual Conference is an outside authority handing down decisions to local churches. The moderator, who presides over the Conference, was once a delegate from a congregation just like ours. Every committee member, every Standing Committee representative (the body of district delegates that sets the agenda and brings recommendations to the floor), comes up out of a local congregation first. This year's moderator, Don Fitzkee, actually comes from our own district, Atlantic Northeast. Some of you may remember him from his years of ministry at the former Chiques Church of the Brethren near Manheim, or from his long career at COBYS Family Services.

That's not so different from how we choose leadership here at West Green Tree. We don't import leaders from outside. We look at who's already part of the body, already committed to the head of that body, and we entrust them with the work. Annual Conference works the same way, just at a larger scale. The body chooses from within the body, and Christ remains the head of it, whether we're talking about our congregation or the whole denomination.

The Rhythm of the Week

Before every single business session, the Conference gathered for congregational singing followed by a time of biblical reflection. Only after that did the delegate body turn to the work in front of them. That order shaped the whole week, worship and the Word first, decisions second.

Outside of the business and worship sessions, Conference offers a wide range of optional sessions on different topics. We chose to attend a few insight sessions, two of which were sponsored by Bethany Theological Seminary on this year's Conference theme, one grounded in the Old Testament and one in the New. These weren't part of the official business of Conference, just something we found worth our time.

The Business of the Conference

Each year, delegates are asked to act on a handful of specific items, brought forward by denominational committees and boards after months of prior work. Here is what came before us this year, one item at a time.

A resolution on weapons transfer. Delegates adopted a statement addressing the international arms trade, grounded in Jesus' words to love our enemies. It names the United States as the world's largest exporter of weapons and calls individuals, congregations, and the denomination as a whole to educate themselves on the arms trade and consider how to respond. This resolution had been developed the previous year and held over to this Conference because of a full agenda in 2025.

A resolution on immigration. Delegates adopted "Walking Together: Immigration, Peacemaking, Conscience, and Supporting Our Neighbors." It reaffirms the church's long history of conscientious objection and civil disobedience, meaning refusal to comply with a law on grounds of conscience, and applies that history to how we relate to immigrants and refugees today. It states that civil disobedience, such as offering sanctuary, may be a faithful response if immigration law comes into direct conflict with the way of Christ.

Adjustments to how ministers are credentialed. The Church of the Brethren has a formal process for recognizing and authorizing people for ministry, governed by a document called the Ministry Leadership paper. Delegates approved two changes to it. One gives licensed ministers, a category of minister with a limited scope of authorized duties, a stronger recognition when they're already carrying out fuller ministry responsibilities. The other simplifies the path for commissioned ministers, another such category, to pursue full ordination. This kind of change to the denomination's governing documents requires a two-thirds majority vote, and it received one.

Pastoral compensation. Each year, a denominational committee recommends a cost-of-living adjustment to the minimum salary guidelines for pastors across the denomination. This year's recommendation was 4.2 percent, along with encouragement for congregations to use an online compensation calculator to help align pastoral pay with actual work expectations. At West Green Tree, the Leadership Team recommends the pastor's compensation as part of the annual budget, brought forward for approval at the November congregational forum.

An interim report from the Review and Evaluation Committee. Roughly once a decade, the denomination elects a committee to study its own structure and how well it's functioning, then report back with recommendations.

This year's committee brought an update on work still in progress. Part of their assigned task is to recommend how congregations and districts, different regional groupings of congregations, can continue working together well in the midst of ongoing disagreement across the denomination about how the church responds to LGBTQ+ persons. That work is not finished.

A new process for denominational leadership, called "New Table." District executives, the paid leaders of each district, began a process with an outside consultant aimed at improving how denominational leaders work together. Delegates received a document naming patterns in current leadership relationships that aren't working well. This is early-stage work, and it will likely surface again at future Conferences.

A financial services transition. For decades, a denominational agency called Eder Financial (formerly Brethren Benefit Trust) has managed services like pastoral retirement plans and insurance. The denomination is in the process of transitioning many of those services to a different organization, Everence Association. Standing Committee spent significant time this year discussing that transition with Eder's leadership. This affects benefits tied directly to pastoral ministry, and the process is ongoing.

Elections. Delegates elected Amy Gall Ritchie, of Manchester Church of the Brethren in North Manchester, Indiana, to serve as moderator-elect. Several other denominational positions were also filled by election this year, boards, committees, and agency roles. Candidates for each of these positions had their backgrounds and qualifications published in the Conference booklet, which delegates received well in advance, giving us time to review who we'd be voting for before we ever arrived in Fort Wayne.

A Closing Word

We want to be honest with you about how to hold all of this. What happens at Annual Conference is not a governing body issuing commands to local churches. It's an offering, statements and recommendations that individuals and congregations are invited to wrestle with and consider. Nobody is compelled. There is no force in religion, and there never has been for us. What we witnessed in that room was a denomination discerning together, still trying to figure out how to follow Jesus faithfully in a complicated world. We're grateful to have carried our congregation's voice into that process, together.