

BRETHREN TRAINING NETWORK
(formerly Brethren Educational Network)

Background and progress:
Report to the Third International Training Consultation
Dubuque, Ia, USA, 27 - 31 May 2014

Background

1. The International Training Consultation (ITC) to be held at Emmaus Bible College, Dubuque, Ia, USA on 27 - 31 May 2014 is the third in a series. Similar consultations were held in Dubuque in June 2005 and May-June 2010. While in its early stages the first ITC was initiated from discussions within Tilsley College Motherwell (GLO), it quickly merged with a stream of activity begun from discussions at the 3rd International Brethren Conference on Mission (IBCM) in Romania in 2003, and both the ITCs and Brethren Training Network have since 2005 continued under the broad umbrella of the IBCM conferences.

2. The IBCM conferences began in 1993 in Singapore and resulted from discussions in the edges of the Lausanne II conference at Manila in 1989 and a seminar on Brethren history at Regent College, Vancouver in 1990. The purpose of the IBCM conferences is to bring together, on a regular basis, national leaders in the Brethren movement from as many countries in the world as possible, for mutual encouragement, fellowship, networking and strategic reflection. Global conferences take place at four-yearly intervals (the next is planned for 22 - 26 June 2015 near Rome, Italy – see www.ibcm.net for more details); increasingly, broadly at the midway point between the global conferences, there are regional conferences in different parts of the world with similar objectives. The subject matter of the conferences is the mission of the church in the broadest sense, but the conferences are building important international links between the national manifestations of the Brethren movement in all their variety.

3. Relevant education, training and leadership development, and communication within the movement, have been important matters of discussion at the IBCM conferences. A very well attended discussion at the IBCM3 conference in 2003 recommended that two networks be set up to serve the movement internationally: a Brethren Educational Network (BEN) and a Brethren Information Network. It was envisaged that both might be facilitated by websites and very quickly a site was set up to serve the BEN. The further development of this site was extensively discussed at the ITC in 2005 and various specific recommendations were made, thus bringing the two streams of activity together.

Conclusions and recommendations of first two consultations and subsequent discussion

4. The development of BEN and the outcomes of the ITC in 2005 and 2010 were discussed at the IBCM4 and IBCM5 conferences in 2007 and 2011. The following papers are available in the Consultation Dropbox:

- a. Review of progress with key conclusions and suggestions made at the Dubuque [I] Consultation of 15 - 17 June 2005
- b. Summary of conclusions and recommendations of Dubuque II, May-June 2010
- c. International Training Consultation – Dubuque II Follow-up - ITC @ IBCM 5 (which summarises the conclusions of the report discussion in 2011).

These three documents are a good introduction to what is now termed the 'Brethren Training Network'¹ and what it aspires to achieve, and it is recommended that consultation participants refer to them.

5. Many of the specific conclusions and recommendations of the consultations in 2005 and 2010 must be treated as matters to be considered nationally or locally: it would be neither practicable nor desirable to pursue many of them at a global or regional level; countries and local areas need to consider whether and how to develop and apply them, depending on national and local circumstances. There is however a number of general topics on which comment might be appropriate, introductory to the present consultation.

¹ In 2011-12, the BEN/BTN International Steering Group (see below) took the decision to revise the designation of the Network to 'Brethren Training Network'.

BTN website and training resources

6. Websites are certainly a way in which training materials can be disseminated effectively and can be particularly helpful in the Brethren movement because many church leaders do not have the opportunity to go away for study, whether in their own countries or abroad. Digitization of texts offers ease of access to material which is often difficult to obtain or simply too expensive in book form for many leaders and potential leaders.

7. As indicated above, the first steps to create a website were taken very quickly after the IBCM3 conference in 2003. It took some years, however, to make an effective website operational, and that was only possible because some funding was provided privately for website design and functionality. Up to that time, the site was no more than a pro forma entry. Even when this step was taken in 2006-2007, much remained to be done to provide the site with written resources and training courses. Since the last consultation, David Clarkson and others at Tilsley College have given considerable time and thought to the website and it has had two redesigns (and has moved to a different URL: it is now at www.brethrentraining.org). It would be fair to say however that the site does not yet really fulfil the basic aspirations that were hoped for in the earlier discussions. Some general observations are relevant:

- a. the original concept was simple, but ambitious:
 - (1) that it should be populated with a wide variety of written materials which were of particular relevance to leaders and potential leaders in the Brethren movement but which otherwise would not be readily available to them; these materials were to be available not only in English, but the other main world languages
 - (2) that it should provide a variety of relevant electronic material for distance learning
 - (3) that it should be a locale for interactive discussion between those in different countries who are interested in training in and for the Brethren movement through forums on relevant topics
 - (4) that it should provide links to the websites of other institutions and activities providing training and materials relevant to the Brethren movement.
- b. even today www.brethrentraining.org struggles to meet even part of these objectives:
 - (1) the amount of material in the form of articles and papers in English that are available on the site has gradually built up, but there is a very long way to go. There have been repeated attempts to encourage consultation attendees and others in the BTN to contribute and suggest materials which might be added to the site, but very few people have contributed or made suggestions. Much of the existing material comes from one set of sources. **While this is a 'static' function for the site, it is in principle valuable because there is a lot of Brethren-orientated material which is not readily available in other ways, and is certainly difficult and expensive to obtain in print form in many countries.**
 - (2) it has not been possible to provide much material in languages other than English.
 - (3) there has been a growth of sites in a number of different countries which provide useful material. Some of these may perhaps be described as somewhat eccentric rather than judicious and academically balanced, but, particularly so far as historical material is concerned, the main websites in mind carry useful documents. Two sites of particular value are www.theologicalstudies.org.uk and www.biblicalstudies.org.uk, because these two sites now carry all the back material of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship (UK) and Partnership up to 1989 and in some cases beyond. These two websites also provide a great deal of useful educational material from other evangelical sources. www.brethrenhistory.org provides digitized material on Brethren history, as does the Christian Brethren Archive website (<http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/searchresources/guidetospecialcollections/brethren/>) and a number of sites in other countries, including the German www.bruederbewegung.de (which has English pages and materials). **The BTN website (www.brethrentraining.org) does have a valuable function as a portal to relevant sites, but much remains to be done to add relevant links and descriptions.**
 - (4) the BTN site has never developed as a locale for interactive electronic forums. This is partly because those who know about the site do not seem to be a group that are

enthusiastic about electronic social networking. During the 2010 consultation, a NING forum was set up by Simon Marshall, but this did not subsequently develop because no one was inclined to use it. This may change with time as generations come to the fore which are more familiar with electronic social networking.

(5) electronic distance learning systems require a lot of expertise and resource to set up and maintain. These have never been available to the BEN/BTN site. Meanwhile, other institutions, including Emmaus Bible College USA and Emmaus College Sydney, have developed such offerings. **It seems unlikely that www.brethrentraining.org will have the resource to develop such courses and that the site should not go further than to be a source of information about and portal to relevant offerings of other institutions.** Electronic distance learning is no doubt referred to in the separate paper on electronic learning which Jim Crooks and Len Smith are preparing for the consultation and their recommendations will be relevant to this aspect of the BTN site.

8. *Leadership with respect to the BTN site.* There is a question about responsibility for the development of the site that needs to be addressed urgently. David Clarkson has been acting as co-ordinator for the development of the site in recent years. He has indicated that he intends to lay down this responsibility after the present consultation. **He will need to be replaced if the site is to continue to develop.** Even leaving aside distance learning, it is clear that the development of an effective website requires considerable effort on the part of someone who can devote time to it and has the necessary commitment. This is not a technical or design question: the effort is essentially of an administrative and policy character—nagging for and identifying material and posting it on the site, and keeping the details up to date. It could require, at a guess, **commitment of a day a week over a two-year period to develop a reasonably well-populated site. This may raise the question of money to fund the time.**

BTN governance

9. For several years now, David Clarkson has been acting as convener of the BTN Steering Group and he has borne much of the administrative burden of organising this conference, with administration of the financial support to participants being managed by Ian Burness. Mark Davies has done much of the detailed work to shape the content of the consultation. Some general discussion of policy relating to BTN was done in the earlier stages in connection with meetings of the Tilsley College Council. But some two years ago the step was taken to form an international BTN Steering Group to supervise the development of BRN and supervise the planning of the consultation (there was an earlier international advisory group which did not function too well because very few members responded to requests for comment). In addition to those just named, the membership of the present Steering Group comprises Stephen McQuoid (UK), Neil Summerton (UK), Russell Thorp (New Zealand), Len Smith (Australia), Simeon Havyarimana (Burundi), Joel Hernandez (USA), Philip Boom (USA) and Luis Mostacero (Peru) (the emphasis towards the UK reflects partly the fact that the impetus for the consultations came initially from the UK). The Steering Group meets regularly by Skype call and this makes an international steering group much more practicable and effective.

10. David Clarkson has indicated that this is the last such consultation that he will take responsibility for organising, and he proposes to step down from the Steering Group after the consultation. **He will therefore need to be replaced and consideration needs to be given to the best arrangements for supervising the development of BTN as we go forward.**

Information networks

11. As noted, the discussion at IBCM3 in 2003 was keen that a Brethren Information Network should be set up. Communication, information and mutual knowledge between countries is important to effective international networking, and until recently it has been haphazard in the Brethren movement. We have not however in the past decade set up a single point for international information, and it is questionable whether it would be efficient and effective to require information to flow through a single nodal point. Those seeking to provide information should be open and transparent and try to make their channels well-known to others.

13. The IBCM website is *de facto* a channel of such information, as are the various historical websites already referred to. An important source of information on individual countries is *The Brethren Movement*

Worldwide: Key Information which IBCM has published in connection with its conferences, drawing on replies to questionnaires put to key people in each of as many countries as possible. The third edition of 2011 has entries for some 94 countries (though some of the entries did not get updated from earlier editions). That edition also had a statistical overview of the (Open) Brethren worldwide provided by Peter Brierley (the leading British statistician of church life and a research consultant to the Lausanne Movement). The electronic version of the text of the 3rd edition can be downloaded from the IBCM website. *The Brethren Movement Worldwide* is to be revised for next year's IBCM conference.

14. One way in which the IBCM website might further facilitate international information flows is by providing links to key websites, whether international or national, which are useful sources of international information. IBCM could look into this.

15. It is neither possible nor even desirable that the IBCM should be the only source of information on the International Brethren movement. The BTN site and BAHN websites provide a good deal of such information, as do some other sites. Recently, there has been created the International Brethren Mission and Media Ministries (IBMMM) website which is focussing on producing a regular newsletter with information drawn from various sources worldwide. This venture has some orientation towards mission from and within Indian cultures.

16. *List of training institutions.* One significant way in which the BTN website has provided international information has been through the list of Brethren-orientated training institutions and initiatives which was first compiled after the 2005 Consultation. We have sought to keep this up to date and to make it more complete in the intervening period, and efforts at updating have been made in the course of preparing the present consultation. This is not a straightforward task, partly because we do not always know of what is being done in particular countries (our ethos is such that it is often difficult to know what is being done even in one's own country!) and partly (may it be said) because institutions and initiatives do not always provide updated material when they are asked to do so! We trust that updated information will be provided as necessary by participants at the current consultation.

Ethos of churches

17. A matter touched on in both earlier consultations, and specifically referred to in the recommendations of 2005, related to 'a short list of core characteristics as a guide to the kind of churches which Brethren missionary effort was seeking to plant'. In some respects, this is a potentially controversial subject because views of what should be included certainly vary. The appendices to the document referred to at 4(a) above referred to consideration that had been given to this subject in the UK. Since then there have been further discussions in the UK and a further document has been produced. The final text is annexed, for the interest of consultation participants. The statement is one of practice, not doctrine, and was specifically intended to encompass the fact that practice is bound to vary widely in detail from place to place, bearing in mind the self-governing character of local churches in the movement. Somewhat similar documents may have been produced elsewhere.

Neil Summerton
24 May 2014

Statement of Practice

We are committed to an evangelical statement of faith such as the one articulated by the Evangelical Alliance. There are also a number of practices that we hold in common which give a distinctiveness to our churches. These are expressed here, not as a test for fellowship, but because they are aspects of church life we are enthused by and because we believe they provide a basis for unity and mutual co-operation.

1. Believe the Bible to be foundational for faith and practice

We believe the Bible is God's word and regard it as authoritative for our individual and corporate life.

2. Welcome all true followers of Jesus Christ

We recognise the breadth of the Body of Christ and wish to fellowship with all true followers of Jesus Christ.

3. Autonomy, yet in relationship with other churches

We believe that every local church should be self-governing yet practise interdependence with other churches.

4. Gospel focused

We believe the church has a fundamental responsibility to reach out to a needy world with culturally relevant evangelism at home and abroad.

5. Ministry and plural leadership

Every Christian (whether male or female, and whether or not in full-time Christian service) is a priest and has the privilege and responsibility of serving God, even though not all have the same roles. We believe that all church members should be actively involved in the worship, work and witness of the church, according to their spiritual gifts; and that for some this will include the gift and responsibility of leadership, which we believe should be exercised on a team basis.

6. Baptism based on personal faith in Christ

We believe every Christian should be baptised by immersion following personal faith in Christ.

7. Regularly celebrate communion

We believe in the frequent celebration of Communion/Lord's Supper and that participation should be open to all who genuinely love and follow Jesus Christ.