"A Giant Bag of Core Values":

Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project

By Lisa Weaver-Swartz*

In many ways, Pastor Scott perfectly represented his denomination.[1] From the interior of his home office, he greeted me warmly and asked a few questions about my own life and work. Even across a Zoom screen, his face spoke kindness, gentleness, and empathy. And he couldn't stop talking about Jesus. Drawing on years of experience pastoring Brethren in Christ (BIC) churches, he fluidly and thoughtfully answered my questions about his spiritual journey, his ministry, and his denomination.[2] "The identity of the Brethren in Christ," he explained, "it used to be the tenets of Anabaptism and Wesleyanism and Pietism." As our conversation continued, he also described what this identity might look like for an individual. Using

* *Lisa Weaver-Swartz is an assistant professor of sociology at Asbury University in Wilmore, KY, where she lives with her husband David and their four children. Her first book, Stained Glass Ceilings: How Evangelicals Do Gender and Practice Power will release this fall. Lisa and her family worship in a house church with ties to several Anabaptist-Mennonite groups, including the Brethren in Christ.* *The research that resulted in this article was funded by the Christian Lesher Fellows Program and the Sider Grants Program, both administered by the E. Morris and Leone Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan Studies at Messiah University.*

[1] All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Pastors are sometimes quoted without pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

[2] The name "Brethren in Christ" speaks to the deep, familial bonds that originally characterized the denomination and, indeed, persist among its pastors, as the following pages demonstrate. In contemporary usage, however, the androcentric language of "brethren" also suggests a gender-based hierarchy, belying the denomination's own commitments to the equality of men and women in the life of the Church. Recognizing this tension and the denomination's own ongoing conversations about the use of language to best signify its identity, this article will use the full name "Brethren in Christ" when it is employed by the pastors themselves, but shorten it to "BIC" otherwise.

practical illustrations from his own life, he underscored the centrality of following Jesus:

> When I work in the yard, when I exercise, and anything that I do, Jesus is a part of that. . . . When Jesus is kept out of the picture I think you miss the good experiences of life. I think they become much richer when Jesus is a part of it, and you begin to understand the blessing it is to be able to take in God's creation, to be able to marvel at how different things grow. I don't know if this is a good answer to your question or not, but [BIC identity] is just talking about Jesus and his involvement in our day-to-day lives.

Accented by a warm and winsome demeanor, Pastor Scott's words convey a deep, otherworldly spirituality.

But he also aimed a very this-worldly critique at his denomination. "Over the past couple of decades," he mused, "maybe fifty years or so, we've lost our identity." He had watched his own congregation, he told me sadly, the people he referred to as "family," polarize along political lines. "We are deeply red," he described the community, "Conservative Republican, Trump-loving, and it's a challenge, to be honest with you, just trying to navigate through those waters, because the [church leadership] is not." He continued, juxtaposing his own convictions against the increasingly politicized postures he saw within the congregation:

> The government is not supposed to be fighting our battles for us. The Church has its role. Government has its role. The state has its role. And we're just in a mess of trouble right now because [the Church] has gotten in bed with the political realm . . . Our kids and our grandkids are looking at us. We're talking about following Jesus, and they look at us, and they say, 'you lie.'

Pastor Scott, however, was an optimist. He expressed hope for the future and appreciation for the denomination's current national director whom, he believed, was doing "a really good job of trying to bring us back to where we were . . . : a Christocentric reading of the Bible. Non-political. A simple lifestyle." Pastor Scott's vision for the BIC's future, in other words, resembled his understandings of its past.

The project

Nearly ten years ago, the 2014 Global Anabaptist Profile illuminated

broad cultural and theological variation within the BIC.[3] The intervening years, as Pastor Scott suggests, have done little to narrow these divides. The denomination has not been immune to the politicization of the broader American Church in the wake of the Trump presidency. By 2021, the BIC found itself caught between Christian nationalism on the right and liberal progressivism on the left. Pastors like Scott, deeply invested in personal piety and community-based discipleship might have, in years past, transcended these polarities. Within an increasingly heated political climate, exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, however, many have been forced to revisit difficult questions about theology, social ethics, and the convergence between the two.

The BIC Pastoral Identity Portraits project emerged in response to these tensions.[4] In contrast with the 2014 Global Anabaptist Profile's broad survey methods, this project engages a small subset of pastors. Pastor Scott is one of twenty-seven who participated in hour-long interviews conducted over the course of seven months in 2021.[5] Semi-structured interviews included questions about each pastor's own religious identity, their perceptions of the state and nature of denominational identity, their level of identification with denominational history, and their hopes and concerns for the denomination's present and future. Participants represent all seven of the denomination's US conferences as follows: Atlantic (five), Allegheny (eight), Pacific (five), Susquehanna (two), Midwest (three), Great Lakes (two), and Southeast (one). Together, they provide leadership to six large congregations (weekly attendance estimated at over three hundred), seven mid-sized congregations (100-300), and fourteen small congregations (under one hundred). The sample included three women and twenty-four men.

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[3] Among its findings, this profile illuminated variation on key questions of identity including ethical and doctrinal issues like divorce, Christian participation in war, the significance of Jesus, and the importance of evangelism. See Ron Burwell, "Results of the 2014 Global Anabaptist Profile: Brethren in Christ Church in the US," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 38, no. 3 (December 2015): 335-376.

[4] Funding for the project was provided through the Lesher Fellows and Sider Grants programs, administered by the E. Morris and Leone Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan Studies.

[5] Participants were selected using randomized sampling techniques applied to listings of current senior pastors provided by each conference. Pastors were contacted via email up to four times to request one-hour Zoom interviews. The project was limited to pastors in BIC US, and did not include any pastors from Be In Christ Church of Canada.

The project's goals are twofold. First, it explores sociological questions of religious formation within a group where theological and cultural commitments are contested. The second is a more pastoral goal of informing ongoing denominational conversations about identity, mission, and leadership practice. While its narrow sampling frame does not allow for broad generalizations about the entire denomination, it does offer the precision necessary to explore an important question relevant to both of these goals: How do pastors understand what it means to be BIC? In other words, what sustains a shared identity among the denomination's leaders?

As with any project of this nature, response bias skews the sample toward some types of respondents and away from others. In this case, perhaps the most noticeably under-represented demographic is the set of mostly Hispanic congregations in the Southeast Conference. Despite being sampled and contacted using the same methods as others, only one of these pastors responded to my requests for an interview. This non-response most likely reflects the cultural distance between these pastors and the rest of the denomination, as well as the time demands of the bi-vocational roles in which many of them serve. The twenty-seven pastors given voice in the following pages do, nevertheless, represent a great deal of the diversity in thought, background, and age present among BIC leaders. Several traced their roots in the denomination through multiple generations. Others came much more recently. These newcomers sometimes seemed to view the interview as an opportunity to process their own experiences as transplants into the denomination, transitions which, for some, coincided with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I feel like I've been in therapy," one said at the close of our conversation, thanking me for the work. In the end, these twenty-seven pastors represent an important subset of BIC pastors: most likely, those whose investment in denominational identity, or curiosity about its composition, was strong enough to overcome the inconvenience of yet another Zoom meeting.

Many also shared concerns about denominational fragmentation. Indeed, the BIC US's nearly 250 congregations, dispersed from the west coast to the Atlantic seaboard, occupy cultural ecologies that range from politically progressive to culturally conservative and from urban to "very rural" (when I asked one pastor to describe his church, he said with a chuckle, "Well, we have cows next door"). As the following pages

illustrate, pastors themselves vary widely in their theological and cultural commitments. When I asked Pastor Corey, "What holds the denomination together?" he paused before answering thoughtfully:

> . . . I'm not sure what's holding it all together. In some ways I feel really disconnected from the rest of the denomination. . . I don't know, anymore, what connects me to the person in Kansas who has a different view on guns than the person in California who's dealing with a refugee and immigrant ministry, to the person Lancaster County who's just trying to stay afloat with sixty people after a pandemic rather than 120.

Pastors were by no means uniformly dismayed by this internal diversity. Some of the same men and women who articulated concern over fragmentation also seemed drawn to the flexibility of a "big umbrella." Pastor Ruth, for example, marveled that a denominational identity could provide meaning and belonging to so many. "I think it's hard not to fit in some ways," she said. Pastor Tim, a long-time member, agreed. At the end of his interview he chuckled, raising an eyebrow prophetically. "I think you're going to find opinions all over the place," he said. "I'm not sure how you're going to draw any conclusions."

Pastors did, indeed, take our conversations "all over the place." Nevertheless, as I listened to their voices, heard their stories, and examined their rhetoric, important patterns emerged. The following pages explore some of these patterns using a set of analytical "frames," developed by sociologists for the work of congregational analysis.[6] While the BIC US is not a "congregation" in the traditional sense of the word, it is, as the following pages demonstrate, very much a religious community, held together by its own set of "frames" that are both informed by and discrete from the frames of its local congregations. Using Ammerman's analytical toolkit, I explore the commonalities—and incongruities—in pastoral discourse about theology, process, culture, and resources. Among the patterns that emerged, I find incoherence between theological commitments and denominational processes, sustained by the group's culture and resources.

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[6] Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

Ana-Pietist theological visions

Pastors' identification with the BIC's Anabaptist heritage quickly emerged as one of their strongest commonalities.[7] "I'm so thankful to be a part of the Brethren in Christ," one reflected, "because the tenets of Anabaptism resonate deeply with me." Another, whose family lineage included several generations of BIC pastors, expressed considerable ambivalence about the denomination, yet he too stayed. "I believe," he said thoughtfully, "that the Anabaptist faith tradition has something, I don't know, 'unique' is probably too strong a word, but something important to offer the world, and that makes it worth staying." One pastor described what he saw as a strengthening or, in his words, "reawakening" among some of his younger peers. "They are newly formed Anabaptists," he said approvingly, "at a new point in their lives." Pastor Jeffrey was more specific. "Definitely for me, Anabaptism is core," he affirmed. "The separation from the world, the peace position, the two-Kingdom theology, the idea that the church is the community of believers." He punctuated this description by adding, almost gravely, "I would not want to lose those things."

Even those who remained personally ambivalent toward Anabaptism identified its ubiquity. One, a newcomer to the denomination, explained, "the term that I wasn't super familiar with, but I'm learning more [about], is this Anabaptism background. That definitely seems to be the piece that everyone latches onto the most. And then outside of that, there are other little pieces we all enjoy, but I think at the core everyone seems to really cling to that identity of being Anabaptist." While not universal, Anabaptist commitment spans lifetime members and newcomers, boomers and millennials, political conservatives and social progressives. As one pastor from the Midwest conference put it, "everywhere you go, we all want to claim Anabaptism."

The denomination's own efforts at identity maintenance reflect its Anabaptist heritage. While not unconcerned with doctrine, the BIC has largely resisted the heady scholarly pursuits that preoccupied its Reformed

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[7] The first frame of study in the Studying Congregations project, theology, explores, "why we do what we do," the beliefs undergirding a religious community's posture toward both the social and supernatural world. See "Theology Frame," Studying Congregations, 2015, https://studyingcongregations.

counterparts. Instead, it has long followed the Mennonite and Pietist groups from which it emerged in prioritizing practical ethics derived from close readings of biblical texts. Historian Carlton Wittlinger chronicles the BIC founders' anti-creedalism, connecting it to Pietist influences and emphasis on the "authority of scripture, with special attention to the New Testament as the highest level of God's self-revelation."[8] This legacy persists. The pastors I interviewed rarely introduced systematic theology or parsed doctrinal details. They did, however, often express deep devotion to a few foundational commitments, namely the primacy of Christ and the Anabaptist peace position. These frequently accompanied more subtle Pietist leanings toward humility and generosity as well as deep ambivalence about evangelicalism's influence.

Jesus and peace

Nearly everyone agreed on the centrality of Jesus. When asked to describe someone with a strong BIC identity, Pastor Kevin didn't hesitate. "I would say they're going to be passionately Jesus focused. . . Christ focused, missionary oriented, definitely with a social justice flavor. Passionate for more people to meet Jesus." Pastor Brian agreed. "[The BIC] are not people who just sit on the sidelines or hide," he insisted. "They are active, but they do it in ways that demonstrate how Jesus would [act]. . . . For me," he continued, underscoring his own investment in this formula, "it always comes back to Jesus." For pastors like these, Anabaptism is a package deal. It centers both theology and practical ethics around the example and teachings of Jesus.

Some of these teachings take special priority. The Anabaptist peace position quickly emerged as a highly salient shared value, binding pastors to each other and to denominational tradition. The men and women who introduced the language of peace into our conversations rarely did so in passing or as an afterthought. Most often, they named it as a personal conviction that clearly shaped their journeys of faith. "I'm a pacifist," one said forthrightly. "I've grown to be more of a pacifist in the twenty years

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[8] Carlton O. Wittlinger, *The Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 35.

that I've been a part of the Brethren in Christ." Another, a lifetime member of the denomination, described his congregation as "a peace church with a pastor who's a peace pastor."

Notably, several others demonstrated less interest in the peace position. One explained that he joined the denomination as an adult and initially resisted the group's teachings on peace. "I've always had a problem with the traditional peace position," Pastor Josh confessed, "I still kind of struggle with it." He nevertheless found resonance with a variation of the position, re-framed in more individualistic, relational terms. "I do like the renewed focus on reconciliation and relationships," he affirmed. Pastor Josh sensed the denomination itself moving toward a more flexible conceptualization of peace, a trend he appreciated.

> I think they've found both a little bit more complexity and also a little bit more of an expanded understanding of what peace is. I think that they have kind of come to realize that the peace position is much more about reconciliation of human relationships than it is just an absence of war, an absence of physical conflict.

Collectively, pastors hold the peace position resolutely, but not stridently. This allows an elasticity that sustains both Pastor Brian's structural engagement, Pastor Josh's more individualistic framework, and others' more apolitical quietism.

Tolerance for variation on this key theological marker points to another traditional Anabaptist ethic: *gelassenheit*. Originally derived from the mystics to denote humble resignation of one's own desires in obedience to God, Anabaptist use of the word also encompasses social relationships. "*Gelassenheit*," explains Mark Van Steenwyk, "is about ridding one's life of all obstacles to love of God and neighbor."[9] Among BIC pastors, "neighbors" bring wide dissimilarities in experience and conviction, variation which can, indeed, present obstacles. Along with their agreement on the primacy of Jesus, the practice of holding even their most cherished doctrines with open hands can facilitate fellowship and, in a way, sustain tradition.

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[9] Mark Van Steenwyk, "Letting Go of the American Dream: Embracing Gelassenheit." 153-161, in *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship*, ed. Joanna Shenk (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011).

Pietist postures

The principle of gelassenheit pairs especially well with Pietist ethics. Pastors rarely named Pietism, Anabaptism's partner in the original formulation of BIC identity, in interviews. They did, however, regularly point to its principles of humility and generosity, generally framing them simply as Christian ethics.[10]

Several narrated the denomination's own history in terms of collective humility. One explained that the group's openness to new ideas from outside its parameters gave rise, over time, to its four distinct streams of influence:

> We've closed the door, oftentimes, to outside influence, but we never lock it. . . . We're careful. We close it because we're proud of who we are, but we don't lock it because we're open to making sure that we can listen.

Even in times of conflict, another pastor marveled, the denomination had avoided the fissures that divided so many others.

> I am just amazed that the denomination went through the level of change that they did in the [19]50s and didn't split. . . . That magnitude of change and the fact that we managed to do it and hold together in doing it is just remarkable to me.

When I asked how he explained this cohesion, he credited two things: strong relational ties and trust among the people:

> To some extent, community ties, you know, the sense of family [held things together]. We probably are not family in the same way now that we were then, as the denomination has grown. I think probably there was a high trust in leadership at the time. Even people that struggled significantly with the changes that were being made, they stayed in relationship with the people who were leading the changes, and they trusted the people leading the changes. . . . It's part of our history that we're not as tied to our beliefs as we are to each other as people.

Generosity toward each other is, he emphasized, is "part of our history."

This history also includes a tradition of reading and interpreting

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[10] Christopher Gehrz and Mark Pattie III, *The Pietist Option: Hope for Renewal of Christianity* (Downers Grove IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

scripture in community. Fusing Pietism's emphasis on personal formation with the Anabaptist focus on community-based discipleship, this inclination both builds solidarity and invites conflict. Indeed, battles over competing interpretations of biblical texts can be messy and painful. Pastors often knew this from personal experience. Nevertheless, many remained committed to community dialogue, however messy. One explained her vision for collaborative practice:

> Let's go to God's word. Let's listen to the Holy Spirit, what is [the Spirit] saying about where we're at?. . .[The point is] not to judge, but to have discipleship across the board. Not a discipleship from on high, but a discipleship with one another. Learning from one another, listening to one another, encouraging one another after Christ.

In concert with the historic Pietist impulse, others overwhelmingly agreed: the people of God, and in this case, of the BIC, are indeed, "better together."[11]

Wesleyan and Evangelical ambivalence

"We have great theology in those three streams," Pastor Matthew reflected, assuming I would recognize Wesleyanism along with Anabaptism and Pietism as formative BIC influences. But, he added sadly, "we must be sidetracked somehow." With this description, he summarized a formula I heard repeatedly. That is, while pastors celebrated Anabaptist principles and subtly upheld Pietist ethics, most paid only passing tribute to Wesleyanism and displayed marked ambivalence about Evangelicalism.

Wesleyanism, the denomination's third "stream" drew very little attention. Only one pastor, Brett, spoke about it with any nuance, and only after expressly identifying himself as an Anabaptist. Nevertheless, he stressed, he also valued Wesleyanism's optimism, "just the idea," he said, "of not being trapped in cycles." He explained:

> I see sanctification as the process not just of being free from sin, but of being free from the cycles that continue to keep us trapped in sin. So that's the language I use, especially when talking with folks who

[11] Gehrz and Pattie, *Pietist Option*, 6.

> have addictions, whether that be in substance or porn or whatever that looks like. Materialism. Food. How do we break cycles that get passed down to us? . . . This [healing from those cycles] is what Jesus can do. And that has become something that I constantly use in how I talk to people and how I counsel folks. . . We can be free from these things. We can be free from those cycles.

Notably, Pastor Brett also expressed some ambivalence about the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification saying, "[the BIC] used to stress [it] a little bit too much." He also subtly expanded the doctrine's heavily individualized and spiritualized focus to include social and cultural contexts, or "cycles" as he put it, better suiting it to his own structurally engaged Anabaptism. But this was unusual. While others mentioned Wesleyanism in passing, they did so in extremely generalized ways. I found no evidence of the heated conflicts over entire sanctification that animated earlier generations of BIC leadership.[12] While the name "Wesleyan" persists, the tradition's emphasis on sanctification as a second work of grace, its most notable contribution to BIC history, no longer appears to be especially important among pastors.[13]

Evangelicalism, in contrast, remains highly salient. Many, including Pastor Matthew, explicitly blame this "fourth stream" for distracting the denomination. His description of the BIC's theological framework ("We have *great* theology in those three streams") noticeably omitted Evangelicalism. Instead, he leveled this assessment: "[Evangelicalism] has hindered us in our Anabaptism and Wesleyanism. . . . I want to be a person who tries to reach people for Jesus Christ, but that doesn't mean I have to [accept Evangelicalism]." Another pastor lamented, "Evangelicalism has been swallowing us up whole, and that's a very concerning thing for me." Others agreed, including one man who was a bit more circumspect:

> At least up until the last couple of years, we wanted to be in the evangelical club. Whatever that meant. It was a nice little epithet to have for us: "Yeah, we're evangelical." I think that we've all been questioning that in the last number of years now. Is it really a

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[12] Wittlinger, *Piety and Obedience*, 227-257, 321-341.

[13] For an historical evaluation of the changing position of Wesleyan identity in the BIC, see Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas, "From Second Work to Secondary Status: The Shifting Role of Holiness Theology in the Brethren in Christ Church," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 63-91.

> worthwhile epithet? I'm not so sure that it is. I'm also not so sure what the evangelical stream is contributing today and, as I start to process in my mind, what has it really contributed in the last ten years?

While questions like these lingered, the majority framed Evangelicalism as more of a liability than an asset to the BIC in the twenty-first century.[14]

Their objections, however, accompanied a widespread, albeit heavily qualified, appreciation for the tradition's historic contributions. The BIC are resolutely missional people, eager to plant churches and spread the message of the Gospel. Even the pastors who most decisively distanced themselves from the evangelical label often credited evangelical influence for cultivating this instinct. As one put it, "I believe that Evangelicalism played a very important role in us broadening our outreach and exposing us to some of the Christianity beyond our very parochial borders back in the 1950s." Several others, including Pastor Rick, recognized that their own families' inclusion in the denomination was predicated on this shift:

> The openness to people outside of the denomination, that's what allowed me to come. My family wouldn't have joined if they didn't have this push to plant churches and draw people who were not BIC. So I'm grateful for some of that evangelical openness and awareness, but at the same time, I recognize that there are costs.

While some celebrated Evangelicalism's continued influence, very few did so without recognizing these costs. Pastor Jeffrey expressed his own mixed gratitude:

> "I think Evangelicalism is important to me in the sense that it's probably helped to push us out in mission in a way that we maybe would not have otherwise been. At least in the last 70 years. But I also realize that Evangelicalism has a whole lot of baggage that I would love to leave behind . . . . Even that word "evangelical" has some very political connotations that I want nothing to do with. So I have a love-hate relationship with that one.

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[14] For more discussion of the BIC's relationship to evangelicalism, see Luke L. Keefer Jr., "The Three Streams in our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?" *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 19, no. 1 (April 1996): 26-63.

Newcomers, pastors grafted into the BIC from other denominations, sometimes expressed special concern over evangelicalism's influence. One explained:

> I struggle with the BIC losing identity—[as] someone who didn't grow up Brethren in Christ. While I feel called [to] neighborhood churches, I don't want to become a 'community church' where there are no distinctives, or the distinctives aren't listed and they aren't known. I don't want to become [a church] that goes with every flow that there is. . . . [I want] to not be labeled an "evangelical" church. That is not a word that I want to be associated with in this day and age, [but] I'm really intrigued with and soaking in Anabaptism.

While pastors' own relationships with Evangelicalism varied dramatically, the majority preferred to see its influence as a gift that been used well, but exhausted. In Pastor Jeffrey's words, "I have a love/hate relationship with that one."

These pastors demonstrated clear patterns of theological commitment—even if their beliefs remained contested. Anabaptism, with its peace position, apoliticism, and Christocentric focus, remains an animating force among them—one that may be increasing in salience amidst growing animosity for Evangelicalism. Pietism's legacy also persists, sustaining humility, personal spirituality, and winsome generosity.

There were exceptions to these patterns. I also interviewed pastors who forthrightly rejected the Anabaptist peace position, a few who spoke in highly politicized terms, and several who displayed the cultural embattlement characteristic of Evangelicalism.[15] But even these individuals underscore the persistence of the BIC's original Ana-Pietist principles. Not only do their beliefs and postures place them in sharp contrast with their peers, their inclusion in the life of the BIC, leadership of large congregations, and service on denominational committees testifies to the denomination's open hands.

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[15] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Evangelicalized process

While most of the pastors I interviewed seemed wary of Evangelicalism, its influence permeates their ranks nonetheless. As they described their experiences within the denomination, these men and women identified processes that noticeably conflicted with their Ana-Pietist commitments.[16] Practices of pastoral appointment and conflict management especially troubled them. Despite their frustrations, few recognized that, in the absence of Ana-Pietist-informed practices, much of the BIC's processes pattern the denomination's instead after its fourth "stream" of influence: American Evangelicalism.

Pastoral appointment

Pastors most vocally objected to the denomination's process for vetting pastoral candidates. More to the point, they protested what they perceived as a lack of process. One lifetime member shared his concern, asking rhetorically, "What's the process by which we figure out that somebody is or isn't a good fit? Not just for [the candidates' sake] but for the sake of the Brethren in Christ as a whole too?" Answering his own question, he lamented, "I don't know that the process is clearly defined, and I don't feel like we've done a very good job of theological gatekeeping when it comes to new pasters." Another pastor, Ethan, aired a similar concern, his words punctuated with audible frustration:

> We say that we have [theological] boundaries, but then we keep hiring senior pastors from outside and saying, "yeah, as long as you understand our view on nonviolence or our view on women, then that's all we want really." As long as you understand it!? . . . but you don't have to actually believe it? You just have to understand what the BIC believes? We've adopted the same model that every other denomination uses for hiring senior pastors, and that is: we don't care where you come from. If you're a good charismatic leader that the church wants, OK, come on in.

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[16] The process frame explores the formal and informal processes that inform decision-making and everything from administrative tasks to cultural identity work within a community. See "Process Frame," Studying Congregations, 2015, https://studyingcongregations.org/process-frame/.

Dynamic personalities and relational connections, Ethan suggested, often stand in for theologically informed boundary work, to the detriment of a robust identity.

Several pastors, new to the BIC, illustrated these processes with their own stories. One, Pastor Derek, described his own experience of being vetted for pastoral appointment.

> A couple of answers in [my doctrinal statement] didn't go really well with the BIC. Nothing major, but women in ministry was one. Inerrancy of scripture was one. The peace position always comes up. So in my oral exam with the denomination, they pointed those out, and they said, "We're OK as long as you understand we're where we are, and none of these are major issues, but let us share some resources with you."

Openly admitting his initial rejection of an egalitarian ministry, the peace position, and the denomination's stance on scriptural authority—key identity markers for many others—Derek dismissed these disagreements as "nothing major." He nevertheless seemed intrigued by the BIC's positions, and even willing to be grafted into some of them. His views on women in ministry, for example, had already shifted in an egalitarian direction. "I seem to fit rather well," he reflected. "I really appreciate that the denomination is not a micro manager."

Pastor Brad, another newcomer, also confessed personal convictions that contradicted key BIC distinctives. "If you were to take my doctrinal positions," he admitted, "and just take six to twelve other denominations and look at all the paperwork [and ask] which one I match up with the best, it would likely not be the BIC." Unlike Pastor Derek, Pastor Brad was unwilling to allow his own convictions to be formed by his new denomination. He was happy to remain a part of the BIC, he said, so long as he could hold and teach his own beliefs. Together, these two men illustrate what others regarded as a troubling lack of gatekeeping. Whatever the motivations behind current vetting processes, they often land pastors who disagree with—and even openly defy—BIC distinctives in authoritative positions.

Some pointed out that these stories could only have taken place in the BIC's very recent past. One, Pastor Rick, explained that historically, pastoral appointments took very different shape:

> Years ago, when a pastor retired or moved for whatever purpose, they would literally look around the room and ask "who's the next pastor?" They would say, "Well, it's going to be so-and-so. The Spirit leads us to nominate so-and-so." There was this humility to the local body. But also amongst the people within. That was beautiful.

Pastor Corey pointed out that even the existence of paid ministry positions is a relatively recent innovation:

> Paid pastors aren't that old for the Brethren in Christ. [The congregation] where I'm at now, its first paid pastor came in the late 1950s. And they were paid like two bucks a week. So the whole paid pastor thing is kind of new. When you think about it in those terms, we're not talking about 500 years of church history, we're talking about decades of church history.

A third pastor, Ethan, noting the same shifts, argued that the old practices aligned better with the BIC's theological distinctives.

> To me, the spirit of the early Anabaptists and the River Brethren [is] a low view of leadership—versus this high authority of the pastorate. Leaders and pastors [were] called from within our church.

For some, memory of these old ways meaningfully symbolized BIC traditions of humility, collectivism, and shared leadership. Drawing from a meaningful past, they favored what Ethan called a "low view of leadership" as a repudiation of hierarchical authority structures. As a professionalized clergy has become normalized within the denomination, however, this symbolism also wanes, enduring most powerfully for those few who, like Ethan, Corey, and Rick, know and value the past.

Importantly, the BIC has not entirely abandoned the practice of calling "from within" its congregations. In narrating their own journeys, even pastors who grew up outside the BIC often described a period of belonging to a BIC church and/or receiving mentorship from a BIC pastor before entering vocational ministry themselves. While this practice does mark some continuity with the tradition, it also represents a shift, not in the process itself, but in those who participate in it. In contrast with the BIC of previous eras, congregations now fill not only with longtime members, well-versed in BIC doctrine and prepared to be held accountable by the body, but also with newcomers. These recent additions, introduced to the group through chance, marriage, or successful outreach, are not necessarily

invested in group identity or interested in group accountability. They do, however, emerge as potential leaders. In the absence of intentional gatekeeping, Pastor Corey explained, more subtle, decentralized vetting processes kick in. "The only thing that's guarding the gates," he said, "is an individual church who's looking to hire a new pastor. They might be saying, you know, what we really value is this guy being a really great speaker."

As a result, new pastors often fit a particular profile. While this project's interview methods did not allow me to observe preaching styles, they did bring me into conversation with the pastors themselves. I easily noticed two commonalities among them, both of which supported Pastor Corey's suspicions. First, almost all were men, and second, most were extremely well-spoken. Younger pastors especially displayed magnetic personalities, easy humor, and sparkling relational skills. In other words, it became very easy to imagine congregations and bishops tapping these particular men for leadership and for the mentoring relationships and opportunities that often expedite the process of calling.

It also became easier to imagine how this group, so supportive of women in ministry with its words, remained so strikingly masculine in its demographic makeup. That is, if congregations are eager to tap ambitious, gregarious men for leadership, they might just as easily overlook women—including those who hold robust BIC identity and even pastoral gifts with the more demure, humble postures often expected of Christian women. One of the women I interviewed, in fact, acknowledged uncomfortably that, to be considered for a pastoral position, she had needed to advocate for herself. While the three women included in this sample do not provide enough data for generalized conclusions, their stories do anecdotally suggest very different journeys toward ordination than their male peers. These included, for example, less mentoring and more reliance on their marriages to connect them with leadership networks and opportunities. If widespread, these tendencies may indicate a contemporary variation on a pattern that dates back to the early twentieth century. "In general," historian Carlton Wittlinger writes of that era, "married women served the church through their husbands."[17] Certainly, this "service" has expanded over

[17] Wittlinger, *Piety and Obedience*, 523.

time with the inclusion of women in ordained ministry. This shift has not, however, necessarily eliminated structural barriers to women in leadership or the inequities embedded in cultural constructions of "godly manhood" and "godly womanhood."

Pastors sometimes named the denomination's failure to live up to its own egalitarian ideals. Pastor Rick, for example, lamented, "We've had numerous—some—women, as pastors. We've had a couple who were senior pastors and, you know, I don't know how many are ordained, but not nearly as many as one would hope given our affirmation of women in ministry and leadership." Pastor Brian provided historical context:

> I think '71 is when we ordained women in ministry in our denomination. Which [means] we were way ahead of the curve, which is awesome . . . but the fact that we have so few women in ministry, especially in senior leadership roles in our church, shows you that it really hasn't mattered.

In fact, the BIC first officially affirmed women in ordained ministry roles in 1982. That Pastor Brian erred by more than a decade may suggest that this detail of denominational history is not often referenced. It may also point to a more general inattention to denominational history itself. Regardless, his comment acknowledges the distinct gap between ideology and practice.

For some, this gap is especially troubling. While Rick and Brian, both long-time BIC members, spoke dispassionately, if sadly, about their disappointment, Pastor Alec, a relative newcomer, displayed more personal distress. He was already struggling to understand the denomination's lack of attention to the issue, he said, when it came up unexpectedly in an online denominational meeting about openness theology. According to Alec, a leader announced during the meeting that, "if you are completely [fine with] open theism, you're not compatible with the Brethren in Christ." Alec described his reaction to what followed:

> That wasn't a surprise, and I still can't wrap my head around most of that stuff, but the [Zoom] comment section was so interesting. Someone said, 'So, you are incompatible based on open theism . . . but we have so many ministers that do not affirm women in ministry, and they're totally fine?". . . To hear our national director say, "yes, that is true. You can be deemed incompatible based on

> your theological stance on this nebulous thing that no one walking around the street cares about, but a visual representation. . . ."

Alec trailed off in obvious frustration before finishing his thought: "When our denomination says we affirm women in ministry, [but] we don't really enforce that. . . I looked at my wife. I looked at my daughter, and I was like, oh my gosh. like wow. That tension," he ended gravely, "that concerns me."

Several others pointed hopefully to a special working group tasked with investigating the inconsistency. Pastor Ruth was less confident of its potential efficacy. She gently reminded me how difficult the issue of women in leadership can be to unpack. "Women in ministry is a challenge that the BIC is facing currently," she said, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Things are changing with that as we speak. There are a lot of pastors that are wholeheartedly complementarian, and so that is. . . " she paused to consider her words, "difficult, when the denomination is saying 'well, but as a denomination, we're egalitarian.'" Drawing on her own experience, she explained one important barrier:

> It's been a journey for me. . . It's difficult, [knowing] that [the question of women in leadership] can end up being a turbulent factor within the BIC and that it has potential for warring sides. So it's difficult, I think, even for women to speak because of that. Nobody wants to see that happen. Nobody wants to be the impetus of that happening. On the other hand, there's been a lot of closet pain going on. I think it's more than what we've known.

Women, Ruth suggested, know that group norms uphold humility and harmony rather than self-advocacy. No one is eager to defy these norms and become the cause of conflict even if, as Ruth suggests, "there's been a lot of closet pain going on." She also suspected a gender pay gap and admitted that she worried about what would happen if her current bishop—a man she found to be quite supportive—would vacate that position. Like the two other women I interviewed, Pastor Ruth found herself both grateful for the denomination's egalitarian position, and worried about its precariousness.

Whatever else it may indicate, the BIC's inconsistency on women's leadership illustrates the importance of process. The theoretical inclusion of women in authority structures remains an important ideological identity marker, garnering what appeared to be heartfelt support from a clear

majority of the pastors I interviewed. But believing in equal opportunity and calling has not created an egalitarian reality. As one pastor put it, "While we embrace egalitarianism, and have since [1982], it is seldom practiced." Processes of pastoral appointment continue to reflect a society and churchly ecology still marked by gender inequities.

Conflict management

Disagreement over women pastors may be uncomfortable, but internal discord is not unfamiliar to the BIC. Denominational history is threaded with conflict over everything from holiness perfectionism to dress codes to missionary photography.[18] Open disagreement may be familiar, but pastors did not welcome it. Most clearly prized the maintenance of group harmony despite the differences of opinion they openly acknowledged. One explained, "the BIC people are, generally speaking, people who walk away from confrontation."

Not everyone, however, appreciated this habit. Several suggested that harmony might sometimes be forced. "I hear terms like, 'the BIC way,'" reported Pastor Jay, "or 'we in the BIC,' meaning, 'we think this way,' even to the point where it's kind of like, 'well, once you learn what we believe, you'll believe like we all do.'" While Pastor Jay expressed this critique graciously ("I don't hold any of this against anybody," he wanted to be sure I understood), he was clearly disquieted by the pattern. Pastor Wes believed that resistance to open conflict hindered his own participation in denominational conversations. "I don't fit in those [spaces]," he explained, "because there, dissent is not easily accepted." Not one to shy away from conflict, by his own admission, Pastor Wes sometimes voiced disagreement with others. "Sometimes the room goes silent," he reported, feigning shock as he described how his dissent was often received, "like, 'I can't [believe] someone just disagreed!' Sometimes the leader will go, 'no, that's not right,' and just move on." Other times, he also reported, others were less subtle in their hostility toward his dissent. In one case, several colleagues privately chastised him for voicing disagreement in a meeting. "I got really

[18] Wittlinger, *Piety and Obedience*.

battered," Wes confessed, still sounding shaken as he described the painful encounter. Underscoring the group's shared value of collegiality and unity, Pastor Wes stopped abruptly, midway through the details of the story. "I feel kind of bad," he said. "I know you're doing a study and I can tell you this, but I just feel bad." Later in the conversation he again interjected, "And again, I love these people that we're talking about." Whatever else this story demonstrates, it serves as a reminder that "walking away from conflict" might minimize displays of open dissent, but it does not prevent casualties.

Reluctance to engage conflict can also stifle important conversations. A number of pastors expressed concern over the denomination's posture—if not its stated position—on the question of LGBTQ inclusion. One suggested that Christocentric interpretations of scripture should allow more flexibility than what BIC practice currently permits. Were there pastors in the BIC, I asked, who favored these interpretations? "Yeah," he responded immediately. "People just don't talk about it very much. . . . As it currently stands, we can't have this conversation, because if you do have the conversation, you're immediately outside of the boundaries. . . ." Another pastor from a different conference also lamented, "There's not a safe place to talk about this at all," he said. "[My bishop] agrees that there is not a safe place. He said to me, as soon as you start to land somewhere that might be outside the Brethren in Christ, then they [denominational leadership] have a problem. If you are questioning or if you are wrestling. . . ." He trailed off. "I think that's a little unfortunate because I don't think that I'm ever going to be a pastor who's done wrestling." He continued, "I don't think we've had good enough dialogue about it at all. . . . I'm at a point now in my own research where I need to talk to the people about this, and I have no one to talk to."

The question of LGBTQ inclusion was highly salient among these pastors. They introduced it, unprompted, into almost every interview. Their own convictions varied. While some wished to see the BIC maintain its firmly traditionalist stance, others wished for more open conversation and flexible boundaries. Importantly, many, though not all, of these pastors also expressed personal commitment to some version of the BIC's current conservative position. In other words, their objections were most often not about the position itself. Rather, they expressed discomfort with the denomination's posture toward other Christian perspectives and concern

over its processes of communication with and support for pastors whose convictions were shaped by them.

They sometimes stressed the complexity of the issue. Matters of sexuality are not simple doctrinal questions, they said, but complex ethical ones with profound implications for the messy realities of human relationships, congregational life, and Christian witness in a changing cultural context. Denominational answers affect real people, they explained, members of their congregations and even their own children. Several shared stories to illustrate. One had recently walked his congregation through an extremely difficult situation. Saddened and frustrated by the divisiveness he experienced, the pastor reached out to his bishop, hoping, he said in retrospect, for empathy. He was taken aback by the bishop's response.

> I remember sending a text message to my bishop saying, if the denomination changed its position, it would make my life so much easier. . . I got a call back from him, and he said, "I totally get how you feel, and I totally get if you've changed your stance on what marriage is . . . and if you have, I will gladly, quietly, accept your resignation, and we'll make sure you leave quietly." And I was like "whoa, whoa, whoa!"

This pastor quickly assured the bishop that his own convictions aligned with the denomination's. But he remained troubled by the conflict that persisted in his congregation—and shaken by the bishop's assumption that a willingness to work with Christians who believed differently automatically brought his own fit for leadership into question. He needed conversation and support in processing a difficult experience, but what he received felt like a threat. Another pastor told a different story. "We had another situation last year," he explained, "where we actually lost a church over [the LGBTQ] issue. It raised a ruckus, and it was a mess. And you know, a really, really good guy got lost."

Bishops are important characters in many of these stories. They serve as agents of denominational process, conduits of communication, and arbiters of conflict. Their influence points to a shift in denominational governance over time. Even as the body of pastoral leaders has grown in ideological diversity, authority has become increasingly consolidated. "Our leadership's a big fan of saying that we're ecclesiastical and congregational," explained Pastor John, "which means we're top down and bottom up." He

shook his head, indicating his disagreement. "Not really, not anymore. We used to be, but we've just made enough changes, that that's not the way it is anymore." The current administrative structure situates a single national director above a leadership council of seven bishops, each representing one of the denomination's seven national conferences. While pastors voiced much appreciation for their bishops, they also sometimes suggested that their exercises of power worked against the BIC's value of "love, grace, and acceptance."[19] Pastor John, concerned about a liberal drift, explained gravely, "Once the denomination, the director or the chair, decides this is the direction we're going, there's really nothing anyone else can do about it . . . . What leadership wants, leadership gets." While Pastor Mark did not share Pastor John's concerns about liberalization, he too lamented the move to a more centralized governance structure:

> [denominational governance] was shared at one point not so distant in the past. That seems more BIC to me than having like a single person at the helm. Not that I have a problem with [anybody] that's holding that position, or may hold that position in the future, but the idea of shared leadership and shared responsibility for the leadership, that does feel a bit more Brethren in Christ to me.

While charting the reasons behind this change is beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting, along with these two pastors, that the shift has moved the BIC away from administrative processes derived from its Ana-Pietist traditions.

This is not to suggest that the denomination traditionally resisted wielding authority. On the contrary, the BIC has always emphasized obedience—an ethic which presupposes authority. In earlier eras, however, that authority operated very differently. Pastor Brian illustrated with a story:

> I don't know that we need to go back to, like, if I want to buy a tractor I need the permission of the entire congregation to buy the tractor, but there was some beauty in that. Things were taken a little bit more seriously in regards to what it means to belong to this family.

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[19] One of the denomination's core values, "Belonging to the Community of Faith," reads, "We value integrity in relationships and mutual accountability in an atmosphere of grace, love, and acceptance." See "Core Values," Brethren in Christ U.S., n.d., https://bicus.org/about/what-we-believe/core-values/.

As the example of congregationally sanctioned tractor purchases suggests, the seat of churchly authority has shifted over time. Pastor Brian recalls a past in which the individual was accountable to the body itself. Today, he and others told me, authority rests with the bishops and with the national director, a man whom one pastor, making a completely unrelated point, called"the Pope of the denomination."

Importantly, the complaints recorded in this section were isolated. Far more often I heard deep appreciation for bishops and gratitude for the connections and support pastors shared with each other. Clearly, denominational processes are not wholly unhealthy. Nevertheless, pastors displayed ambivalence. Many held questions, and even outright critiques, of the processes they observed. "There's just been a lot of fear lately," one sighed, "that people view things differently than the denomination." Importantly, this pattern cut across wide ideological and demographic lines, connecting political conservatives and social progressives, newcomers and lifetime members alike. On one thing they agreed: denominational processes for pastoral appointment and conflict management lack transparency.

These critiques document an important incoherence. The same men and women who championed Anabaptism, egalitarianism, humility, and generous community often found these lacking in denominational process. One lamented:

> I don't think we can be as top-down and as anti-dissent as we've been for very long without losing what it means to be Anabaptist fundamentally. I mean, Anabaptism is a ground-up belief. It was anti-top-down from the beginning because we were being killed by the people who were all the way top-down.

In the absence of processes informed by Anabaptist and Pietist commitments, the BIC often conforms to the model of broader American Evangelicalism. The elevation of charismatic men to leadership, the subordination of theological distinctives like the peace position, the emphasis on multiplicative growth, and the denomination's increasingly hierarchical leadership structures all mirror this fourth "stream" of influence. But the resemblance is perhaps most clear in the set of boundaries it chooses to police and which it de-emphasizes under its "big umbrella." Whether its ambivalence on women's leadership, its uncomfortable tolerance of Trumpian politics and Christian nationalism, or its reactionary

censure of questions about LGBTQ inclusion and new approaches to biblical hermeneutics, there is little to distinguish the BIC from broader Evangelicalism.

This puts the denomination's less evangelical pastors in an especially perplexing position. Those who rejected evangelical paradigms or simply chose to subordinate them to the BIC's historic Ana-Pietist framework sometimes found their ethics overwhelmed by embattled evangelical gatekeeping. The same gatekeeping, they reported, that tolerates a great deal of deviation from BIC distinctives like the peace position and gender egalitarianism does not extend this same generosity to the highly politicized issues that animate Evangelicalism. Pastor Ethan explained:

> It seems like you can keep moving to the right as far as you want, but there's a real limit for how far you can go to the left on a whole bunch of issues. Nobody asks a lot of questions if you go all the way to that edge over there with Christian nationalism, not really, but if you say anything about an inclusive theology, or open theism, or anything that people get overly worried about, you know, then all of a sudden. . . It seems weird that the left is a slippery slope, but on the right, you don't even have to affirm women in ministry, and somehow you're still leading. I can't wrap my mind around that.

Even Pastor Ethan's language of "right" and "left" betrays the ubiquity of polarized cultural embattlement, a hallmark of white American Evangelicalism.[20] Embattlement against the world was, indeed, also a hallmark of the BIC's early days.[21] In sharp contrast with Evangelicalism's aggressive and highly politicized postures, however, the young denomination expressed its resistance against the world through collective expressions of nonconformity including repudiation of materialism and violence. Counter-cultural practices like these much more easily coexist with the ethics of humility, generosity, and peacemaking that contemporary pastors overwhelmingly wished to prioritize. Not surprisingly, those who were most attached to these Ana-Pietist ethics were also the most troubled by the uneven gatekeeping processes they observed in both pastoral appointment

[20] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*.
[21] Wittlinger, *Piety and Obedience*.

and conflict management. The weight of tradition might be on their side, but, perhaps ironically, it is often eclipsed by embattled gatekeeping processes.[22]

Pastors whose convictions place them on what Pastor Ethan calls "the right" would likely interpret these processes differently. Almost uniformly, however, these were the pastors who also identified most closely with broader Evangelicalism, not Anabaptism and Pietism. While anecdotal, this pattern underscores the connection. If the BIC are, as one pastor put it, "evangelicals with a difference," that difference is not easily apparent in its processes.

Cultural incoherence

The difference is also difficult to identify in the group's cultural forms.[23] While the BIC has not invested heavily in the production of culture, the most notable exception is its codification of ten "Core Value" statements. These enjoy broad salience among pastors. They also contribute to identity incoherence through the ambiguity of their language. "I mean," one pastor sighed, "eight or nine out of the ten probably could be embraced by any denomination." Another agreed:

> If you pull almost any evangelical off the street and show him our core values, they would likely nod and be like "Totally." Nearly every single thing there is just Christian, which is fine, but [as far as] core values being really distinctive. . . ? For example: "we value heartfelt worship." Who doesn't value heartfelt worship?

He went on, "To me it's bizarre. . . . I mean if you look at some of our East Coast churches and then [some of our churches in] Kansas, you know? We [both] look at Christian faith, we both use the word Anabaptist, but holy cow!" As this observation suggests, while the Core Values statements facilitate a common language among pastors, this commonality sometimes obscures incompatibilities on matters of practical ethics.

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[22] Importantly, while some of these less-embattled pastors might be accurately described as culturally "left-leaning," they are joined by others who orient themselves around warm, spiritualized piety rather than cultural, or even theological, flashpoints.

[23] The culture frame includes embodied practices, material, visual, and written artifacts, and the stories that give them meaning. See "Culture Frame," *Studying Congregations,* 2015, https://studyingcongregations.org/culture-frame/.

Even the more specific Core Values sustain fragmented interpretations. For example, pastors often expressed special attachment to "Living Simply," ninth in the list of ten. In contrast with the highly visible collective expressions of nonconformity and anti-consumerist lifestyle standards that defined this value in earlier eras, the current statement reads simply: "We value uncluttered lives, which free us to love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully." Pastor Jeffrey explained his understanding of this shift:

> Simplicity for us looks different than it once did. At one time it would have been simple dress. There would have been a lot of legalistic do's and don'ts because we're separate from the world. I hope that we're still separate from the world, just in different ways, you know, less about how we dress [and] more about our values and our priorities and our centered-ness on Jesus.

When I pointed out that "centeredness on Jesus" is a considerably more nebulous requirement than plain dress and asked Pastor Jeffrey whether it might yield any practical difference in the Christian life, he struggled to answer. Broadening my question, I asked, "Is there more to BIC identity than just belief?" To this, he responded without hesitation. "Mm! Boy, I sure hope so!" He continued thoughtfully,

> Yes, I think, absolutely. Hmm. . . I mean, I think our denomination has always been focused on right belief and right practice both. Faith without works is dead. That's been a key idea for us that we would get from our Anabaptist roots. You know, it's not enough just to believe the right things. We've got to actually practice them.

Still, Pastor Jeffrey could not identify a practice of simplicity with any specificity.

Clothing has not, however, entirely lost its symbolic value. In place of the early BIC's collective counter-culturalism, clothing now sustains a variety of highly individualized meanings. Pastor Shaun, for example, mentioned his own habit of purchasing secondhand clothing, an effort to renew the ethic of non-conformist simplicity in a consumerist society:

> I talk [to my congregation] about a simple lifestyle—which is so relative, you know. I mean, I know what I call a simple lifestyle is luxurious [to] 90 percent of the world, and so that's a tough one to try to navigate. But I try to [drive] used cars and buy clothes at second-hand consignment stores. We don't have cable. I [do still]

> have technology. I watch a lot of sports online and that sort of thing, but we try to keep life simple, not overscheduled.

In place of Pastor Shaun's resistance against consumerism, Pastor Tim framed clothing choices as symbolic gestures of reverence for God:

> I said [to my congregation], "you should look different when you come to God's house. God is here. It's God's presence. You shouldn't look like you're going to work, or you shouldn't look like you're going to the beach." And there were people yesterday that looked like they had gone to work and that they had come from the beach. So that's the kind of nonconformity [I teach]. If a person who walks into our congregation can't distinguish us from the rest of the world, not only by what we say, but by how we live, then what's the purpose of meeting together as a church?

Providing yet a third example, Pastor Matthew encouraged an ethic of modesty:

> Now we aren't even sure what modesty is in how to dress. Our church is more conservative. . . , but we've lost that understanding that there is a need for modesty, there is a need to bring glory and honor to God even in what we wear.

All three of these pastors encouraged intentionality in dress as a statement of nonconformity with worldly patterns, variations on the original logic of "Living Simply." Their interpretations, however, differed markedly from each other. The common language of simplicity and nonconformity persists without sustaining shared practical ethics. While collectivist notions of community and shared identity linger in the way pastors talk, at least in terms of dress, the practical ethics derived from these notions are now defined by individuals rather than by collective agreement.

In contrast with yesteryear's plain coats and head coverings, this new, flexible symbolism encourages individualized self-expression. One newcomer described the array of fashions displayed at his first pastoral gathering. "We had the suits-and-ties in one area," he recalled, gesturing with his hand to indicate his recollection of the space. "We had the full tattoos, gauge earrings, you know, [in another]," he shook his head in an apparent mix of admiration and amazement, "and I'm telling you, these are all BIC pastors, and they don't match at all!" Another pastor contrasted two leaders' appearances at a similar gathering. One, he reported, wore

"orange pants [that made him look] trendy and cool," while another opted for a cardigan and "the baggiest khakis you've ever seen." Meanwhile, a new pastor showed up in "ripped skinny jeans and really fancy high top clean sneakers, [like he'd] stepped off of some Instagram influencer account or something." These observers colored their descriptions with eager approval, marveling almost gleefully at what they experienced as a visual display of Christian unity amidst diversity. The symbolism of clothing has reversed. Individualized self-expression—once sanctioned as a repudiation of group ethics—can now be celebrated as the opposite: the BIC's collegial embrace of people who do not conform to each other. This individualism, likely a legacy of Wesleyan Holiness influence dating as far back as the 1890s, also bears striking resemblance to contemporary white evangelical toolkits.[24] Its presence suggests that evangelical influence extends beyond process and into denominational culture.

In efforts to distinguish themselves against this influence, pastors often cited another Core Value, "Following Jesus." With few exceptions, they expressed dismay and even disgust at the cultural and political polarization dividing their communities and, in many cases, their own congregations. One described these tensions:

> [Another] Brethren in Christ Church is located not too far from us. The pastor there, the week before the election, preached a highly political sermon. He didn't tell you, "Vote for __." There were some people at [our church], who said, "We need to be doing that," and there were some people in [nearby congregation], who said, "We shouldn't be doing that." And so that's a good example of the challenge here in the Brethren in Christ.

Another pastor also identified the 2016 presidential election season as an inflammatory one for the BIC. Troubled by what he saw, he too distanced himself from political narratives, situating the "Kingdom of God" as an alternative.

> We are about the Kingdom of God. We're not about the Kingdom of

[24] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

> the United States. For those that are in Canada, we're not about the Kingdom of Canada. We are about the Kingdom of God, and I think that is our unique voice in this season. I think it's hard for people to stay firm to that. But for me, I've just tried to say, man, that's a hill I'm going to die on: we're about the Kingdom of God. I'm not going to be left. I'm not going to be right. I'm going to point you to the way of Jesus.

For pastors like these, allegiance to Jesus's Kingdom offered a welcome opportunity to sidestep the political narratives of both the political left and the right, and to focus, instead, on otherworldly allegiances.

Jesus-centered language peppered most of the interviews.[25] Together, Pastor Brian and Pastor Kurt, both long-time members of the BIC, illustrate. Pastor Brian admitted that he sometimes spoke about politics to his congregation, but, he clarified, this was his effort to reorient people away from worldly political divides and around Jesus.

> We're not red, blue, pink, or purple. I couldn't care less where you're coming from [in terms of political party]. There are people in [my congregation] that are red and people, that are blue. You've got to learn to love 'em. So I just put a stress on what it means [to] love Jesus. . . [if] Jesus is at their core, [they're] gonna learn to get along. . . . I feel like that is constantly what I'm trying to push at.

Jesus, he suggested, is the antidote to polarization. Pastor Kurt, likewise, stressed obedience to Jesus: "I love that we emphasize obedience," he said of the BIC tradition, "radical obedience to Jesus." In response to my request that he describe a person with strong BIC identity, he imagined someone who "would be passionate for Jesus." Pastor Brian agreed, concluding his answer to the same question with a more specific description: "They're not people who just sit on the sidelines or hide. They are active, but they do it in ways that demonstrate how Jesus would [act]. So to me, it always comes back to Jesus." Pastor Brian and Pastor Kurt would enthusiastically agree: Jesus is the center.

Stated allegiance to Jesus's kingdom, however, does not automatically

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[25] For an exploration of the meaning applied to "Jesus" and other key linguistic tools within the BIC as a whole, see Burwell, "Anabaptist Profile."

eclipse other value systems. These two men's agreement on the priority of Jesus, in fact, obscures a deep divide between their ethical frameworks. Early in his interview Pastor Brian expressed grief over racial injustice, especially in the wake of George Floyd's death, and he celebrated Christian participation in "nonviolent direct action" as a response. Juxtaposing an active peacemaking approach against popular narratives of American political conservatism, he urged, "you just do so much more good with a hammer than you do with a gun or a [border] wall." In jarring contrast, Pastor Kurt described himself as "strongly conservative politically." He explained, "I believe in the [border] wall, [and] I believe that we do need to hold onto our values." Kurt also identified himself as a Trump supporter, "because of some of the core values that he has." Invoking the language of "core values," Pastor Kurt suggested that he found continuity between the former US president and the BIC's own value statements. While this choice of words was likely unconscious, it nevertheless places Pastor Kurt in stark contrast with many of his peers, including Pastor Brian. Together, these two men illustrate the magnitude of incoherence in pastors' social ethics—even among those who agree on the primacy of Jesus.

Pastors themselves are not unaware of this incoherence. Pastor Denis, for example, recognized the potential of what he called "worldly ideologies" to divide. He proposed a solution that I heard articulated with varying degrees of specificity across these interviews: downplay politics and focus on unity in Jesus.

> I think one of the biggest [challenges to the BIC], and I've seen this personally as we've gone through this last election cycle and everything, is allowing our allegiances to worldly ideologies [to] split us versus keeping our focus on Christ. And yes, maybe we believe different things in a worldly sense, in certain areas, but you know, I've had people on both sides of the political fence leave the church because we're not more "you need to do this or that." We focus on what Scripture says, and we're going to stay focus[ed] on Christ and then the rest of it's a secondary allegiance. . . . So for us to stay committed, stay connected, and stay together, it's going to take us making a major emphasis on "look: our allegiance is to Christ and Christ alone."

But "Christ and Christ alone" can mean dramatically different things to different people, depending on their experiences and influences. In its

simplicity, this mantra leaves important questions unanswered. Does, for example, allegiance to Jesus imply complete renunciation of activity in the realm labeled "political," including when it overlaps with Christian ethics on questions of, for example, human rights, abortion, poverty, immigration, and religious liberty? None of the pastors I spoke with would be likely to advocate for complete Christian indifference on all of these questions. Discursive commitments to Jesus and the Kingdom of God offer a refreshing alternative to the ideological battles that rage in American culture and threaten to divide churches, but they do not resolve the pressing question of where politics ends and Christian social responsibility begins.

Only a few pastors recognized the costs of this deficit. "I kind of thought that a church that's so relational like ours could overcome all of that," one said. Like others, he had preached Jesus and the primacy of the Kingdom for years, only to see parts of his congregation fall apart in the polarization that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election.

> We've always highlighted the fact that it's OK [to disagree]. You don't have to be uniform to be unified right? It's OK to have differences of opinions, political or otherwise . . . if Jesus is our center. So this was the first time where that kind of broke down. . . . [T]hese outside influences are so strong that it's causing people to not be able to reconcile in that way.

He was not the only pastor to report painful congregational losses due to ideological disagreement. While others cling to the hope that a strong enough focus on Jesus can, in fact, overcome other divides, these pastors sit with the painful reality that sometimes Jesus really isn't enough.

The Core Values, then, facilitate both cohesion and incoherence. The language of "living simply" and, especially, "following Jesus," provides discursive common ground. The relational unity it facilitates, however, may be more of an illusion than pastors realize. Because the Core Values avoid specific ethical prescriptions, individuals easily interpret them through other frameworks. Mirroring current cultural divides, some of the BIC's Jesus followers work against Christian nationalism and racial injustice, while others embattle themselves against Critical Race Theory and immigration reform—all in the name of Christ. In other words, pastors' interpretations of the Core Values are heavily informed by contradictory political and cultural narratives. These remain largely unexamined for points of resonance with and divergence from the denomination's own theological commitments.

Ironically, the apoliticism built into the BIC's tradition obscures their influence, making them extremely difficult to repudiate.

Relational resources

What, then, holds the BIC together? What keeps Trump supporters who are animated by opposition to wokeness and concerned with personal liberties in fellowship with cultural progressives who champion immigrant rights and support Black Lives Matter? While the pastors I interviewed struggled to answer this question, across their responses I found a clear and consistent answer: The BIC is held together by relationships.[26] Pastors regularly employed familial language to describe these bonds. "It definitely felt like home to me," one pastor said, recalling his introduction into the denomination. "We're family," another agreed, "and I think that's pretty essential to who we are. . . . We're deeply relational. We're brothers and sisters in Christ, and we choose to act in a familial way, which I actually love about being here."

Pastor Isaac felt this bond as strongly as anyone in my sample. For him, the familial connection was more than metaphorical. It spanned a lifetime of experiences and several generations of genealogy interwoven with the BIC's own history.

> The amount of time that I have in the Brethren in Christ, it would be hard to walk away from because my relationships are here. The people that I've built those relationships with are here. There's a lot of time and energy put into this faith background. To walk away from it, I'd need a pretty darn good reason as to why.

But Isaac had, in fact, considered walking away. He confessed increasing disillusionment with the denomination and its cultural trajectory. Still, the bonds were too strong. He couldn't quite imagine leaving. Along with others who claim this identity, he clung to it, bonded most meaningfully by relational ties.

Building group identity around relational connections carries both benefits and liabilities. Pastor Aiden, newer to the BIC, described slowly realizing the depth of the group's bonds:

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[26] The Studying Congregations resource frame includes economic, physical, and human resources. See " Resources Frame," *Studying Congregations*, 2015, https://studyingcongregations.org/resources-frame/.

> We just started doing Zoom classes for the ordination core courses. There were about twenty of us, and I love that because I got to meet people from Michigan and Florida. . . . I could tell [the instructor's] first impulse was to ask, So, you're in [state], so who's the pastor there? Who's your dad?" His feelers were going out to [for example] "I know your grandparents" [or] "Oh, your great grandfather was my first pastor." And I was like, "Wow. These people—they're all related."

He also recounted the experience of a colleague, another transplant into the denomination:

> [My friend] noticed that [at BIC pastors conferences] people always look at your name tag first. And then they kind of look away because his last name is [not familiar in the BIC]. As an experiment, one day he wrote "Engle" on it. And more people talked to him.

For newcomers who lack them, the BIC's deep relational ties can be alienating. But for others, the same ties serve as valuable points of connection to the past and to personal identity. An outsider in this connection game, Aiden recognized both its strengths and weaknesses. "It's not an aristocracy," he said thoughtfully, clearly sorting through a variety of experiences as he tried to explain, "but just the, the names. [It's] like there's a royalty."

He also noted another important feature of the group's tight relational network: outsiders can be grafted in. Not wanting me to take his observation about BIC royalty as a complaint, Aiden added, "I haven't experienced the negative side of that, because one of them likes me." This throwaway comment was nevertheless loaded with ramifications. Bishops and other leaders often extend hands of friendship, support and, indeed, as the denomination's name suggests, *brotherhood* to longtime members and newcomers alike. "The Brethren in Christ are the ones who came and got me," one long-time pastor reminisced, recalling his introduction to the denomination years earlier. "They came and got me where I was, and they didn't judge me. They loved me. They nurtured me and my wife as well." For another, the catalyst was not a congregation, but a bishop: "A forty-five-minute conversation turned into four hours," he remembered, "and by the end of that phone call, if [that bishop] asked me to run through a brick wall, I would try." The history and familial ties that bind what insiders call "cradle BIC" members to each other are impossible to manufacture, but they are not entirely impenetrable.

While refreshing in an age of echo chambers and cultural polarization, this relationship-based identity has real limits. In some ways, interpersonal bonds are the BIC's shared practical ethic. Embodied testaments to its "big umbrella" mentality, they bring Pietist humility and Anabaptist notions of community to life. But as the basis of shared identity within a group this geographically and ideologically dispersed, they are extremely fragile. Even if these bonds are strong enough to stand tests of time and increasing cultural polarization, they will not transfer easily to new cohorts of leaders—particularly those without family histories to facilitate identity construction and buy-in. Pastors often described their bishops as important bridgebuilders, working with ministers whose beliefs and cultural postures sometimes put them at odds with each other, and even the denomination. When these bishops, many of whom are tied not only by relational bonds but also by cultural histories and family roots, retire, their replacements will come from the current pool of pastors, many of whom do not share these deep roots. The relational ties they do share are unquestionably valuable, even robust. Insofar as group identity depends on them, however, it is as precarious as a single generational shift.

Recommendations

There is much more to learn about BIC US pastoral identity. This study's findings are, of course, limited by its parameters. The almost complete non-response from the Southeast conference, for example, suggests a very different relationship to denominational identity among pastors in that region. Additionally, the strong Anabaptist commitment I found among the pastors I interviewed, paired with their widespread perceptions of an evangelical threat, suggests that Evangelicalism's influence on BIC leadership may be stronger outside this sample than within it. Far more inquiry is warranted to fully explore BIC identity—even among pastors.

Nevertheless, if the men and women profiled in this project are any guide, the denomination is in deep need of identity work. Amid their concerns about fragmentation, however, many imagined a denominational future built on renewed commitment to shared values. If the BIC wishes to move in the direction these pastors prescribe, its leadership might consider the following recommendations.

First, identity work should address the discontinuity between pastors' theological convictions and denominational process. While inconsistency

between belief and practice is hardly unique to the BIC, it is especially noteworthy in a group that prioritizes orthopraxy. Process carries a great deal of theological, and ethical, significance. The ways decisions are made, the types of people who have voice in them, and the ways authority is exercised, are all institutional liturgies. They facilitate shared experiences that form individuals and shape communities. They speak loudly of a group's deepest convictions about the nature of God and how the social world should work. If Anabaptist commitments to peacemaking, shared leadership, and compassionate social ethics are key to the BIC's distinctive identity, as many of these pastors believe they should be, uniting these commitments with internal processes could transform practices like ordination, methods of dealing with conflict, and even mundane administrative tasks into meaningful affirmations of identity.

Second, the denomination might consider tightening the language of its Core Values. In their current ambiguity, these statements enable relational bonds across wide ideological divides—certainly a remarkable accomplishment. But this same ambiguity can also confine shared identity to rhetoric. As Pastor Corey lamented, "I don't see those ten Core Values being regularly portrayed even by my peers, let alone my congregants." If, along with Pastor Corey, the denomination wishes its shared ideals to extend beyond rhetoric and into ecclesiastical and missional practice, it will need to employ more specificity.

Third, the denomination might address a deficit in collective memory. Pondering his own vision of a more robust denominational identity, Pastor Kevin said thoughtfully, "Somehow we've got to figure out how to tell better stories that help us dream better dreams for Jesus's Kingdom. . . . Somehow, we've got to story better . . . ." Indeed, even the pastors who displayed the most commitment to robust BIC identity did not share an oeuvre of rituals, artifacts, and narratives. While many reported learning denominational history in pastoral training classes, only a few could recall meaningful stories or characters from that history when asked. They almost never referenced these stories as they described rhythms of worship, polity, and Christian education, or their own journeys of discipleship. But stories are an important basis for group identity. They ground the present in the past. They provide frames of shared meaning. They spark prophetic imagination.

It is not that the BIC lacks meaningful stories. Indeed, its present rests on a past filled with women and men who grappled with the complexities

of personal piety, collective nonconformity, and faithful discipleship in their own challenging cultural contexts. Earlier eras of its evangelical-Anabaptist-Protestant-Catholic genealogy offer even more compelling narratives. But memory of these legacies remains largely relegated to denominational archives and history books, salient only to individuals who pursue their own study of the past. Nevertheless, as the BIC anticipates its 250th anniversary in 2028, stories of its own past offer a tremendous opportunity. They could become links in meaningful "chains of memory" as sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger puts it, connecting contemporary actors to the past and strengthening their bonds to each other in the present.[27] This kind of story building requires intentionality. To "story better," as Pastor Kevin memorably put it, will require the elevation of some narratives—and the rejection of others. A shared identity, in other words, articulated in specific language and embodied in practical ethics, cannot sustain both an individualistic, embattled evangelicalism and a collectivistic, generous Ana-Pietism. Whichever path the BIC chooses, the stories of its own past offer valuable resources toward coherence.

Finally, also toward this end, I recommend increased attention to cultural resources. Stories are forged and learned. They are lived, sung, baked, painted, prayed, and wept over every bit as much as they are written. The BIC US, pastors told me, does not regularly produce or promote resources for these purposes. Pastors fill this vacuum with social media, books, and podcasts from external sources. Congregations, likewise, consume Christian education curricula, worship music, PowerPoint graphics, and liturgies of various kinds. These resources do not always point in common directions. Several pastors mentioned the influence of Reformed evangelical leaders like John Piper, Tim Keller, and John MacArthur. One pastor acknowledged MacArthur's Reformed and dispensational theology saying, "I really don't like either one of those at all, but I read his commentary every week before I prepare for my sermon, and almost every week I find something in his commentary [that makes me] glad." Other pastors identified a competing set of influences: Brian Zahnd, Greg Boyd, David Fitch, and other voices

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[27] See Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

who promote post-evangelical and neo-Anabaptist frameworks. While some of these voices might, indeed, align well with BIC identity, together they drive pastors in contradictory directions. To address this divide, the denomination might undertake the work of identifying and promoting—and perhaps even producing—resources that support its own theology and mission.

For their part, many of the pastors profiled in this project expressed optimism for the BIC US's future. Together, they imagined a denomination characterized by its original Anabaptist and Pietist traditions, even if their interpretations of these traditions varied. Importantly, many also valued evangelicalism's influence on strategies for mission and outreach, even as most wished to nurture an identity distinct from that influence.

Whether the future they envision is possible or not is a very different question. The answer will depend on several factors, not the least of which is the external ecology of BIC US congregations.[28] Denominational authority—and even pastoral guidance—are singular components in a broad web of influences on each faith community. Each congregation is also shaped by its regional culture, its ties to local organizations, and the demographics of its physical neighborhood. In times past, lifestyle prescriptions like plain dress and intense congregational accountability elevated internal cohesion over external ecologies, but as the group's process and culture blend with broader evangelicalism's, the influence of other ecological factors has grown. These factors will continue to shape BIC congregations, informing and limiting the possibilities for their futures.

As they imagined these futures, pastors especially wished for renewed intentionality. Some emphasized the denomination's outward-facing posture. One, for example, prescribed a renewed emphasis on faithful social witness:

> We ought to be kind of leading the way on creative ideas for making peace in a divided world . . . expanding what Shalom looks like. [For example] nonviolence affects economic stuff. It affects family

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[28] Ecology, the fifth and final frame for congregational study highlights the demographic, regional, religious, and network ecology of faith communities. See "Ecology Frame," *Studying Congregations,* 2015, https://studyingcongregations.org/ecology-frame/.

> relationships, language that we use, and then of course, how we view our country's involvement in conflicts. I don't see any resources really coming out to help churches with those things, and I think that we could do a better job . . . . We actually have history to rely on. We have history to go back to and say,"Look, this core of who we are is actually the elements of the Kingdom."

Others emphasized internal practice. One described the pain of watching his own congregation turn against one of its members, eventually pushing him out of the community. Pain and anger clouded the pastor's face as he recalled these events and the denomination's response. Instead of interpreting the episode as a failure of the Core Values, however, he argued in their favor. Their potential, he maintained, using a metaphor from natural science, needed to be released:

> I'm getting images of my eighth-grade physical science class when I think of the Core Values, because there's a tremendous amount of potential energy in there. But it's not kinetic energy yet. It's almost like there's a giant bag of core values attached to the ceiling with a rope and I want to cut it so it'll start swinging.

Pastors like these may be the denomination's most valuable assets. While there were some notable exceptions among the pastors I interviewed, most collectively imagined a winsomely countercultural denominational future, informed by evangelicalism's missional impulses, but explicitly defined by Anabaptism and Pietism. While in the past, pastors like these might have understood tradition to be in "direct conflict with mission," many pastors now frame elements of tradition as mission.[29] They believe that the BIC has something to offer the world, not despite but because of its traditions.[30]

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[29] John R. Yeats and Ronald J. Burwell, "Tradition and Mission: The Brethren in Christ at the End of the Millennium," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 19, no. 1 (April 1996): 67-115.

[30] The Studying Congregations project offers valuable tools for continued inquiry on both denominational and congregational levels. Further explorations by denominational leaders, in partnership with social scientists and church historians, will find these tools and frames useful as they nurture ongoing conversation, generate new questions, and seek new ways of flourishing for the BIC.