



Church Member Profile 2006

The Brethren in Christ Church

Executive Summary of Results

Ronald Burwell

Introduction to the study

The Church Member Profile 2006 project is a cooperative research project involving three denominations: The Brethren in Christ, Mennonite Church USA, and the Church of the Brethren. The project builds upon two earlier denominational studies that involved five Anabaptist denominations. Those studies, conducted in 1972 and 1989, provided important information for the denominations. Church Member Profile 2006 seeks to update the earlier studies and also to add new information about the current nature of these three denominations. Leadership for the project has been provided by Dr. Donald B. Kraybill of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College. Assisting Dr. Kraybill are three sociologists each representing one of the denominations: Ronald Burwell—BIC (Messiah College); Carl Bowman — Church of the Brethren (Bridgewater College); and Conrad Kanagy — Mennonite Church USA (Elizabethtown College). Support for the project was provided by the Young Center, the three denominations, MMA, MCC, and MDS.

The purpose of the Church Member Profile 2006 (CMP2006) is to better understand the beliefs, values, practices and needs of our members. Using items from earlier projects it is possible to track nearly 35 years of changes in beliefs, values and practices. In addition, other items seek to understand the current attitudes and concerns of members today.

The research strategy involved obtaining membership lists from selected churches (following a rigorous sampling plan) that represented churches in the United States. In February 2006 an eighteen-page questionnaire was sent to a sample of 7,000 church members drawn from the three denominations (1,000 for the

Brethren in Christ; 3,000 each for the Mennonite Church and the Church of the Brethren). Using a variety of follow-up strategies, a final sample for the Brethren in Christ was obtained with a response rate of approximately 73%. During the spring and summer of 2006 the data from the surveys was tabulated by the Survey Research Center at Franklin and Marshall College. The completed data set was available beginning in the fall of 2006. Beginning in the fall of 2006 and extending into 2007 and beyond, each of the three denominations plans multiple ways of disseminating the results of the project. This executive summary represents a first wave of reporting to the Brethren in Christ constituency.

The Survey

The CMP2006 questionnaire was divided into a number of sections that organized questions under a variety of topics. In the pages that follow, we will report some of the highlights of each of the following sections:

- **My Faith Story**
- **Religious Beliefs and Practices**
- **Congregational Life**
- **Family Life and Background**
- **The Larger Church**
- **Faith and Social Issues**
- **Faith and the Larger World**
- **Stewardship and Lifestyle**

For each of these sections we will present a brief summary of the findings in a narrative format. The order of these sections approximates the actual order of questions in the original survey. Note that we will not report all the results for each section (there are over 700 variables in the current data set).

My Faith Story

Under this heading, there are questions that probe the faith journey of the respondents. Each one is asked questions about their faith commitments and how they view their relationship with God. The BIC respondents at almost the 100% level say that they have accepted Christ as their Savior and Lord. Further, two thirds (66.7%) of BICs say they can identify a specific moment when they came to faith in Christ. For the other third, they see their journey as real but not a particular moment they can identify.

91.7% *believe Jesus died to complete God's plan of salvation*

Most BICs are comfortable describing themselves as “born again” (89.3%) and they say their faith is either the most important (54.9%) or a very important (41.7%) thing in their lives. Most believe that God has a specific plan for their lives (93.0%) and about 7 in 10 describe their relationship with God as very close (31.0%) or close (37.9%). Interestingly, just over half (56.1%) say they were baptized in a non-Brethren in Christ church.

Religious Beliefs and Practices

This section is one of the most detailed and contains a number of items dealing with beliefs about the person of Jesus Christ, salvation, sanctification, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible. It also asks about a variety of religious activities such as prayer and Bible study.

In looking at the results, it is very clear that the Brethren in Christ respondents hold to a very high and orthodox view of Christianity. Traditional

beliefs are firmly embraced. For example, most believe that Jesus is both fully divine and fully God (93.1%). They see Jesus as born of a virgin (98.6%) and the only way to God (88.2%). They agree that without faith in Jesus, persons will not be saved. They reject a punitive view of the atonement (e.g., only 6% think Christ died to satisfy God’s anger against sin). Finally, given the ongoing struggle of believers to balance faith and works, the majority of BIC believe that both what one believes and how one lives are important in terms of salvation (62.7%).

One of the three main streams of Brethren in Christ influences has been the holiness movement. The survey asked several questions on holiness and sanctification. The majority of BIC respondents saw sanctification as beginning at conversion but continuing as one grows in Christ (65.6%). When asked about their views of holiness, the most frequently chosen answers were that holiness involves surrendering one’s life fully to God (77.9%) and that holiness has application to the choices we make about how we live our lives (48.1%). A minority thought that holiness meant living a life free of sin (27.1%).

62.7% *believe that salvation depends equally on one's beliefs and how one lives*

In regard to the Holy Spirit, Brethren in Christ respondents see the Spirit working both in individuals as well as within the faith community (51.6%). Although a slight majority (52.0%) of BICs have not experienced the “gifts of the spirit,” a number testify to having had such experiences. Further, a clear majority of the Brethren in Christ see charismatic gifts as genuine gifts of God’s spirit

to some Christians even if they personally have not experienced one or more of these gifts (78.6%). Only 10% see charismatic gifts as human emotions rather than God's spirit. More than one in four report experiencing a miraculous healing in their body (29.4%).

Brethren in Christ respondents hold a high view of the Bible. About 97% see the Bible as the Word of God. More than half support a literal reading of the Bible (58.2%). When asked about the relative authority of the Old versus the New Testament, about two-thirds said that both the Old and New Testaments have equal authority. Rather than focus only on some parts of the New Testament, the largest number of respondents noted that all of the New Testament had influenced them (48.4%).

In examining a number of traditional religious practices, the BIC respondents said that they are involved in a number of these practices on a regular basis. Some 76% report praying daily and about 36% also read or study their Bible on a daily basis. Over half (55.7%) participate in a small group at least once a month and eight out of ten BICs attend church as least once a week (83.1%). Finally, when asked about how they would describe their religious faith, the most popular choice among those given was to identify themselves as "Brethren in Christ" (71.9%). Other popular choices were "spiritual" (47.3%) and "evangelical" (44.3%).

Congregational Life

Congregational life questions tap the attitudes regarding various church policies and traditions. The data show that, for this sample, the respondents have been members of BIC congregations for an average

of 15 years. Less than 1 in 3 had parents who were members of the Brethren in Christ. At some point in time, 55.4% said that they had been members of other non-BIC congregations.

Questions about ordinances reveal that BIC members believe in open communion (nine out of ten said that communion should be open to "anyone who accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord"). A majority (62.3%) believe that adult baptism should be required of anyone baptized only as an infant.

65.7% *ascribe equal authority to both the Old and New Testaments*

Although not an ordinance, a valued tradition among the Brethren in Christ is the practice of washing one another's feet. One question asked people to choose among a number of different responses to this practice. Many saw this tradition as a symbol of humility and service to others (72.9%). They also agreed that feet washing can be spiritually moving (43.2%) and a symbol of spiritual cleansing and purity (25.8%). A minority found the practice either outdated (5.0%) or awkward and uncomfortable (19.6%).

Respondents were asked their view of women in pastoral roles. Over 85% agreed that women could fill pastoral roles. Of this group, however, about half felt women should not be the lead pastor. Finally, when asked about a practicing homosexual being a member of their congregation, over three quarters of the BIC sample (78.8%) said they would not accept such a person into church membership.

Family Life and Background

More information is found in this section on the background of the members who were part of the sample. Basic demographic data show that the sample was slightly more female (58.3%), largely white (93.9%), married (81.1%), and middle-aged (Median age = 53 years).

In addition, about one half of the sample had lived in their same location for over 20 years. A similar proportion (50.5%) reported living in farm or rural areas. About three quarters of the group were employed either full-time or part-time outside the home. The largest occupational groups were professional/managerial, technical/sales/administrative, and service workers. Nine out of ten had graduated from high school and over half had further education after high school.

94.6% *report that their relationship with their church is very important to them*

When asked about the level of happiness in their marriages, the BIC respondents indicated that they were either very happy (68.9%) or somewhat happy (21.4%) with their marriages. One question pursued the issue of whether or not any of the respondents had felt that they had been treated unfairly by others in the church. Generally, there was relatively little indication of experiencing unfair treatment (18.6%). Of a number of possible reasons for being treated unfairly, the one receiving the highest number of responses (yet only at 5.5%) was the feeling of being treated unfairly because one was “non-BIC.”

The Larger Church

A number of questions attempted to find out how respondents viewed the larger church which primarily refers, in this case, to the Brethren in Christ denomination. When asked what might be distinctive about the Brethren in Christ, the top four differences which were mentioned were: family-like atmosphere, an emphasis on peace, an emphasis on simple living, and evangelism.

Each person was asked to rank the various priorities from the denomination’s vision statement (Impact 2010). The top four priorities were: fervent prayer, healthy congregations, active compassion and leadership development. The lowest priorities were: global mobilization and bold communication. When asked if they prefer their own denomination, almost eighty percent (79%) indicated a loyalty to the Brethren in Christ. Some of these, however, also noted that they could be happy in another denomination (42.1%). Finally, respondents were asked about the way in which mutual aid should be handled. A strong majority preferred to have a cooperation between both local churches and church-wide agencies (77.7%).

Faith and Social Issues

Like most U.S. residents, Brethren in Christ members are aware of a number of social issues that are the focus of much contemporary debate. In the Church Member Profile a number of these issues were explored including issues of race, sexual morality, and various government policies. When asked their views on attempts to overcome racism through intentional efforts in hiring and promotion, a major-

ity opposed such attempts (63.9%). At the same time, respondents also indicated that they thought it was still important to have leaders and staff in church related agencies reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the wider BIC denomination (68.3%).

Tapping attitudes about the current immigration debate, about six in ten respondents thought that immigration was a “good thing” (61.3%) with the rest thinking it was a “bad thing” (38.7%). Strong majorities opposed abortion (82.2%) and unmarried people living together in a romantic relationship (86.4%). When asked about whether or not the U.S. government was spending enough to protect the environment, the BIC respondents were almost evenly divided with those saying that the government is spending too little to protect the environment (42.7%) versus those who say that government spending on this cause is “about the right amount” (40.3%). Finally, when asked about the right for a person with an incurable disease to take their own life, about three quarters of the sample said they should not have that right (72.7%).

One of the items in this section presented respondents with a long list of possible social issues and asked them to identify which ones were “always wrong.” The top five social issues chosen as wrong were: extramarital sex, homosexual relations, pornographic materials, x-rated movies and premarital sex. The issues with the lowest numbers responding that they were always wrong were: dancing, buying stylish clothing, spanking children, entering the armed forces and working as a police officer.

Faith and the Larger World

Issues in the larger world include questions about one’s relationship to the government and political attitudes. The Church Member Profile study explored how respondents felt about military involvement and also their voting behavior. In addition, CMP gathered opinions regarding the Mennonite Central Committee as an organization that helps connect the Brethren in Christ with the wider world.

40.7% *say peacemaking and nonviolence are very important*

Perhaps a bit surprising given the Brethren in Christ commitment to peace and non-violence were the responses to a hypothetical question about possible compulsory military service. When asked what they would do if faced with the draft, a majority (58.0%) said they would engage in some sort of military service including either regular military service (31.2%) or non-combatant military service (26.8%). In a related question, 75.2% disagreed with the statement “It is wrong for Christians to fight in any war.” Yet, the same respondents also agreed (88.2%) that “Peacemaking is a central theme of the Gospel.” Finally, about six in ten completing the survey noted that they had an immediate family member who has served in the military (59.5%).

Looking at political issues, respondents were asked about both political party preference and their voting. Almost three quarters (74.0%) identified with the Republican party and about the same percentage reported voting for George W. Bush in 2004

(77.8%). In more general terms, 74.4% said they were politically conservative or very conservative. The rest were moderate or liberal. When asked about their view of the war in Iraq, a majority of the Brethren in Christ respondents said that they thought the United States “did the right thing” by going to war against Iraq (61.0%). Another question tapped attitudes about capital punishment. Sixty one percent (60.9%) agreed with the statement that the death penalty should be used to punish convicted murders. Finally, several questions explored attitudes toward the Mennonite Central Committee. Over ninety percent (92.3%) of BIC respondents said they support the mission of MCC and almost three-quarters (73.8%) were satisfied with the program and emphases of MCC.

85.5% *feel that living a simple lifestyle is important or fairly important to their Christian witness*

Stewardship and Lifestyle

The last section of the survey covered issues related to contributions and use of economic resources. Respondents were also asked about material possessions and leisure activities (e.g., reading and television watching). About seven out of ten BIC respondents report giving at least 10% of their household income to church and charitable causes (69.9%). They estimate that they give about \$228 per month in congregational offerings. Almost half (47.1%) reported that during the past two years their giving to their local congregation had increased; only eleven percent reported decreased contributions.

With regard to lifestyle issues, the BIC respondents reflected a fairly comfortable level of existence. Over half of the households had incomes over \$50,000 and almost nine out of ten owned their own home (87.8%). Most respondents had computers (78.2%), the internet (72.9%), and cell phones (81.9%). They report watching TV about two hours a day and using the internet for about 30 minutes a day. When asked about their reading habits, about 1 in 4 (24.2%) said they read the BIC publication, *Seek*, regularly.

Although BIC respondents report some stress from the pace and complexity of daily life (62.2%), they also say that they are very happy (55.6%) or fairly happy (41.5%). Given a list of possible temptations that Christians may face, the top five temptations, according to BIC members, are: looking out for my own needs and interests; concerns about how I look; earning as much money as possible; enjoying popular movies, TV shows and music; and getting the nicest home and furnishings I can afford. On the other hand, from a list of possible social issues that we face, BIC respondents ranked the following as the top five issues: erosion of family values; abortion; child abuse; sexual immorality; and terrorism.

For further information regarding the Brethren in Christ participation in Church Member Profile 2006, please contact:

Dr. Ronald Burwell
rburwell@messiah.edu

MESSIAH COLLEGE
P.O. BOX 3057
ONE COLLEGE AVE.
GRANTHAM, PA. 17027