Changes to guidelines for Church Workers’ Assistance Plan fund

Changes have been made to a benevolence program that has long provided financial assistance to congregational, district, and camp employees within the Church of the Brethren. At its fall meeting, held Nov. 19-20 in Gettysburg and New Oxford, Pa., the Church of the Brethren Benefit Trust Board approved a number of changes to the Church Workers’ Assistance Plan that allow more of those with severe financial need to qualify for financial assistance.

Reduced tenure to qualify, increased support for those with more years of service, a modest cost of living adjustment to the maximum amount of grants allocated, and a new loan program for congregational, district, and camp employees and denominational agency staff members who don’t qualify for grants were part of the sweeping design changes approved by the Board. The revised plan document also spells out the processes that allow for exceptions to be granted, and ensures that all applicants who are denied grants will have their paperwork reviewed by two senior Brethren Benefit Trust staff members.

While most of the changes will occur immediately, the loan portion of the revised guidelines now needs to be developed and then enacted. Thus, loans will be implemented sometime in the future.

The BBT Board also approved housing allowance designations. This is an annual Board action that allows retired ministers who receive a Pension benefit, Church Workers’ Assistance Plan grant, or disability benefit, to consider these payments as housing allowance, up to the amount for which each retiree qualifies.

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Brethren Values Investing

A new name for “Socially Responsible Investing”

At its November meeting, the BBT Board voted to discontinue its use of the term “socially responsible investing” when referring to the investment screens of BBT and its affiliates, and begin using the more precise designation of “Brethren Values Investing.” This new terminology, or “BVI,” will now be used in place of “socially responsible investing” or “SRI” as the identifier of the social screening for BBT and its affiliates.

Socially responsible investing has long been a centerpiece of the investment program of BBT and its affiliates, as all assets under management are invested, whenever possible, in a manner that is consistent with the positions of the Church of the Brethren as expressed in Annual Conference statements. These guidelines exclude the 25 largest publicly traded U.S. defense contractors and companies that generate 10 percent or more of their revenues from weapons (and their components), abortion, alcoholic beverages, defense, gambling, tobacco, or pornography.

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Inspired to help make the world a better place

Winston Churchill asked, “What is the use of living?” as part of his reflection on what it means to be a humane human. The full quote is one of the many that caught my attention over the past 2½ years as I engaged in intensive study to earn a Master of Business Administration degree, which I concluded early this month. During this 13-class program, I read more than 25 books, as well as numerous journal and resource articles; engaged in a variety of team projects with my 25 classmates; and wrote more papers than I care to remember! I was expected to solve algebraic equations that were so complex I merely exclaimed, “Yeah, right!”

During the program I interviewed business professionals, challenged BBT’s investment managers based on information I had discerned through knowledge I had acquired, and became accustomed to assessing businesses both from quantitative data and through qualitative analysis. The experience has changed me positively in terms of who I am as a person, as an employee, and as an employer.

But what is really important are resources I was exposed to that I believe to be both poignant and relevant to everyday life, and worthy to be shared.

- One person at a time can make a profound difference on society. Look up John Newton, Charles Simeon, and/or William Wilberforce. Each had conviction in their beliefs and perseverance in their attitudes and helped bring about major societal change in England. Their stories, which I read about in John Piper’s The Roots of Endurance, are inspirational.

- Each person, in and through the work they do, is on a journey. Some will be at a place of employment for a short time, passing through as they continue learning, growing, and expanding their knowledge, capabilities, and leadership, while others may work for that employer for their entire career. Both situations are common and there’s no right or wrong. However, as The Dream Manager by Matthew Kelly illustrates, people should be challenged throughout their working career to learn, to grow, and to dream. A company that can help its employees work toward achieving their dreams is well on its way to being a successful company, and one that possesses a dynamic culture.

- Success should be gauged through horizontal metrics. For example, in a business, success should be measured based on the outcomes of all departments and people, not through vertical silos. Success should be team focused, not an individual achievement, so that both a company and its people can benefit from good achievements. This is one of the premises of Performance Leadership by Frank Buytendijk.

    • Leaders should embrace the “Elements of Character” as described in Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership by Craig Johnson. These traits include courage, temperance, wisdom and prudence, justice, optimism, integrity, humility, reverence, and compassion. I believe this list to be a strong grouping of ethically focused traits that great leaders should embody, which in broad terms include being inwardly focused on themselves and outwardly directed to serve others.

    • Treat change as a normal challenge. Not all personalities are equipped and prepared to address constant change, but successful leaders are. There are two basic objectives that a leader must address to navigate a company through constant change. “The first is in guiding the organization to deal with constant change. This requires CEOs who embrace change, and who do so by clarifying strategic intent, to build their organization and shape their culture to fit with opportunities and challenges that change affords,” write John Pearce and Richard Robinson in Strategic Management. “The second front is in providing the management skill to cope with the ramifications of constant change.”

    • For places of employment to be successful and invigorating for employees, there must be a focus on creating a culture of psychological safety. “Creating psychological safety for organizational members who are undergoing transformational learning involves eight activities that must be carried on almost simultaneously — a compelling positive vision; formal training; involvement of the learner; informal training of relevant family groups and teams; practice fields, coaches, and feedback; positive role models; support groups in which learning problems can be aired and discussed; and systems and structures that are consistent with the new way of thinking and working,” writes Edgar Schein in Organizational Culture and Leadership.

    • Leadership comes through self-direction and motivation. As Jim Collins writes in Good to Great, “The best leaders we studied did not have a visionary ability to predict the future. They observed what worked, figured out why it worked, and built upon proven

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Heart, Soul, and Mind

Christmas is a story of journeys. Joseph and Mary made the 90-mile trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem. The wise men traveled from a far greater distance. The shepherds moved only a few miles, but it was a pilgrimage nonetheless, from a familiar hillside to a place where there was something new and unexpected. Even the angels came from some far-off place. And soon after arriving, the wise men quickly turned around and left in order to avoid another encounter with Herod. Mary and Joseph and the child escaped too, making the long trek to Egypt.

These were journeys of hope, and they also were journeys of uncertainty. Only the angels were sure of what was to come. For everyone else there was the hopefulness of the moment and the uncertainty and even danger of the future. Thus there is an underlying wistfulness in Christmas, a yearning, an anticipation of what is to come.

Most of our Christmas stories emphasize hope and not yearning. They have happy endings. We resonate more with the image of a manger under a holy aura than of a dark journey to Egypt. We think of the wise men in stately procession rather than in a hasty and surreptitious retreat into the night. And surely there is no uncertainty in Santa. Jolly St. Nick never dredges up notions of danger. Most Christmas stories and movies have happy endings. But on that first Christmas night and in the days after, no one knew how the story would come out.

There is one Christmas story that mingles hope with the wistfulness of a journey. It comes from Russia where the word for grandmother is “babushka.” It is said that an old woman, Babushka, lived alone. In one version she is poor and lives in a rough, small hut at a remote crossroads. In another she lives in a comfortable house in a village. In every story she is a hard worker, and she is “house proud.” There is not a speck of dirt anywhere inside or outside her house. Babushka is also alone, and she yearns for children. In one version she had a small son who died. In another she never had children. When she is not cleaning her house, she is making toys or wraps, which she puts aside for the children.

One bitter winter night she looks out and sees a star. As dawn approaches, she hears distant noises coming closer. In some versions it’s a sleigh, in others it’s a camel train even in snowbound Russia. She hears a knock, and when she opens the door, there stand three richly dressed kings with servants. They ask if they may come in and rest. She fusses over the mess the camels are making on her front path, and she insists the men remove their boots, but she invites them in. They say they are following a star that will lead them to a child who is to be born a king. They ask to rest during the day until it is night again and they can see the star and resume their journey. In the version where she is poor, she offers them soup. In the version where she is well-off, she offers cakes and pies and other delicacies. In turn they tell her of their travels and of the child.

When it is time to leave, they invite her to go with them. Her heart lifts, and she is tempted, but her house is a mess. She cannot leave without cleaning it up. The wise men go and she goes to work. The stories differ on how long it takes her, but by the time she is finished she has realized that she wants to join the journey to find the child. So she takes a large basket and fills it with food and toys and warm wraps as gifts for the child. And she sets off. Everywhere she asks if people have seen the three travelers. The answer is yes, they went this way or they went that way. There has been a new snow and so the tracks have been covered. Along the way she meets people in need and slowly begins to empty her basket. Whenever she sees an infant, she pulls back the blanket and studies the face. She knows that it’s not the child she seeks, but she leaves a toy.

One version says that Babushka never finds the Christ child, and that she is still traveling across the face of the earth looking for him. And everywhere she goes she leaves toys for the children.

In one version, Babushka does make it to Bethlehem and when she comes into the stable she finds all the people she has helped with her gifts. By giving to them, she has given to the Christ child. This is a lovely idea — that whenever we truly look into the face of another we see Christ. But I think I like best the picture of Babushka always traveling in hope, always looking, never finding, always wistful, but in the end being satisfied by the journey itself. — J.L.

Making things easier for those who come after you

Here are some things to think about as you consider what to do with your assets. Your first step is to consult with an estate planning attorney and a financial planner. The following are matters to consider and about which you should ask questions.

**Ask how probate works.** A will names the people and/or organizations to whom your assets will go in the event of your death. As you may know, these are called beneficiaries. Assets passing to a beneficiary through a will must go through a public and sometimes lengthy and expensive legal process called probate. But there are ways of avoiding probate in order to pass assets to a beneficiary in a quicker and less public manner.

**Ask about Joint tenancy, POD, and TOD.** If you hold an asset in joint tenancy with another owner or owners, then the asset will pass directly to the other owner(s) when you die. If you have a Payable on Death beneficiary on your bank account, then the account balance will belong to that named beneficiary at your death. If you have a Transfer on Death beneficiary on your investment account or real estate, that asset will be transferred directly to that named beneficiary. You can also name a direct beneficiary on your life insurance policy or retirement account, who will receive that asset directly upon your death.

**Ask about beneficiary designations.** In each of the above cases you will need to make a beneficiary designation, naming a person or persons as the primary beneficiary or beneficiaries. You should also name a contingent beneficiary as the alternative choice to receive the proceeds if the primary beneficiary is not alive to receive the benefits of the account at the time they are paid.

**Questions to answer about your beneficiaries** —

- If you have multiple primary beneficiaries, have you indicated how you want your assets distributed among those beneficiaries? Ask your attorney to explain the options.
- Have you named contingent beneficiaries as well as primary beneficiaries?

**Assets to designate.** You should discuss your assets with an expert, and know where you should designate both primary and contingent beneficiaries, not only to avoid probate, but to facilitate the transfer of the asset —

- Pension Plan
  - Have you discussed the best way to handle these assets?
  - Have you taken into account state and federal tax changes?
  - Do you know if there are plan limitations?
  - Have you taken into account life changes that may affect the beneficiary designation (adoptions, births, deaths, divorces, marriages, special needs, etc.)?

- 401(k)
- IRA
- Life Insurance Policy
- Annuity
- Checking account
- Savings account
- Certificate of Deposit
- Living Trust

**Who needs to know?** The following should have copies of your beneficiary designations —

- You and close family members
- The executor of your estate
- Trustee of your living trust if you have one
- Pension plan provider
- Financial Adviser
- Attorney

It is important to give careful thought to how your assets are handled. Your family and beneficiaries will thank you. However, don’t forget that things change. Remember to check back on your list and update information and beneficiaries regularly. — J.L.

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**What else should you think about?**

It would be wise to collect the following important papers, documents, and information for you and your spouse, and put them somewhere for safe keeping —

- Will
- List of all your beneficiary designations
- List of all your user IDs and passwords
- Birth certificates for you and family members
- Social Security numbers and record of SS benefits
- Deeds and titles
- Certificates of deposit
- Marriage certificate
- Divorce/child support documents
- Military discharge papers
- Driver’s license number
- Copy of mortgage and other loan statements
- Credit and debit card account numbers and copy of account statements
- Copies of bank, IRA, 401(k), and pension plan statements
- Copy of retirement account statements (IRA, 401(k), pension plan)
- Copy of non-retirement account statements (brokerage, mutual funds, annuities, etc.)
- Info on all insurance policies (life, auto, health, long-term care, etc.)
- Info on your utilities, phone, cable, and internet accounts
- Safety deposit box number and key
- List of antiques and household valuables, when purchased, and for how much
- Keys and passwords for storage units and online storage
Focusing on well-being in the workplace

Of note at this year’s Church Benefits Association annual conference was an emphasis on the importance of well-being. It was reported that in addition to the concept of wellness, which is measured by health risks and factors such as cholesterol levels, weight, diet, and exercise habits, well-being should also be considered and measured. Already at work on this is Gallup-Healthways, which has put together a scientific survey that looks at five elements with the greatest impact on well-being, including purpose, social, financial, community, and physical. Garnering data and promoting individual action plans based on well-being assessment results can actually help employers improve performance and productivity, and lower healthcare costs. Employees use the survey results to learn about actions they can take to improve their well-being. This was just one of many topics covered over the two-day conference, held in Phoenix, Ariz.

When sitting in on the CBA plenary or break-out sessions, BBT staff hear industry experts share information on everything from legislative changes for pension plan administrators, to new IRS regulations for health insurance; from the latest legal challenge of the housing allowance for pastors, to best practices in IT, marketing, and communications. The BBT staff benefits greatly from networking with other CBA members from across the country who are involved in the very same work we do, and who have similar goals.

CBA is made up of 47 church pension boards, religious orders, and denominational benefit programs for clergy and church professionals. In its own words, the CBA “is dedicated to promoting excellence and preserving the traditions of church benefit boards and church benefit plans through nonpartisan education, collaboration, and fellowship.” — J.B.

“BBT Board update” continued from Page 1

The Board also —

• Approved a new initiative related to how it invests funds under its management (See article at bottom of Page 1).
• Met with more than 40 members and clients who joined the Board and staff for a time of socializing, lunch, and an informational session on bonds and the economy.
• Met with senior staff of Southern Pennsylvania District and Cross Keys Village — The Brethren Home Community.
• Retained Agincourt Capital Management as one of BBT’s bond managers. — N.D.

“New name for Socially Responsible Investing” continued from Page 1

Companies engaging in human rights violations (including slavery and child labor), as well as companies that consistently violate environmental regulations, are also screened out.

The reason behind this change is that there is no specific definition or single term to describe SRI. For example, a Google search of the meaning of SRI produces multiple results, such as community investing, ethical investing, green investing, impact investing, mission-related investing, responsible investing, socially responsible investing, sustainable investing, or values-based investing.

Accordingly, using the term “SRI” to describe the investment approach of BBT and its affiliates can be an unintended source of confusion because of its many meanings, and requires interpretation to distinguish it from the other forms of SRI. Phrases such as “investing in a Brethren way” or “Brethren values” are essential to characterize the SRI activities of BBT and its affiliates.

It should be noted that though BBT and its affiliates will use a new name to refer to their socially responsible investing, the actual funds have not changed and are invested just as they have been. Perhaps the best way to think of this new approach is — BVI is simply SRI the Brethren way. — J.L.

“Inspired to help make the world a better place” continued from Page 2

serving as a staff member of BBT and to perform what I believe to be meaningful work. That is why I resonate with the Winston Churchill quote to which I previously referred — “What is the use of living, if it be not to strive for noble causes and to make this muddled world a better place to live in after we are gone?” Amen. — N.D.
BBT’s socially responsible investments uphold Brethren values.

Merry Christmas
from the staff
of Brethren Benefit Trust

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