

Churches Revitalized

Four churches will be telling their stories of revitalization, renewal, and resurrection at the Reference Council gathering of Western District Conference, Saturday, November 19, 8:30 AM – 1 PM (lunch included) at Tabor Mennonite Church, rural Newton. Many of the older and more rural churches of Western District Conference have been in gradual diminishment over the past three decades. For some this downsizing has reached critical change points with an absence of children, overworked volunteers, and a reduction in pastoral staffing. Some are asking, “Will we survive?” Others are asking, “Is it possible to reverse these trends? Is it possible for God to do a new thing with us?”

The purpose of this Reference Council gathering, *Revitalizing our Churches*, is to provide inspiration with testimony and guidance through instruction that could help church leaders imagine a new day. Reference Council is the gathering for Western District Conference commissions, committees, task forces, and pastors. We are extending the invitation to any lay leaders that are intrigued by this theme.



Randy Smith

Randy Smith, Transitional Pastor at First Mennonite Church in Halstead, will be the primary presenter. Smith will draw on transition ministry theory, his experiences with Mennonite congregations in Greensboro, NC, Hillsboro, KS, and currently Halstead, KS, as well as his own design for pastoring through revitalizing transition. The design and process will be relevant for congregations in transition periods as well as those with long term pastorates.

“Rather than coasting along,” Randy says, “congregations are discovering that the time between called pastors presents an excellent and energizing opportunity to recover vision, refocus priorities, renew spirituality, and revitalize ministries. The opportunity of transition can be a rich, healing, and fun time for equipping the congregation as an effective ministering team with the next pastor and a promising future.”

Call (316-283-6300) or email (wdc@mennowdc.org) to register for *Revitalizing our Churches* on November 19.

Western District Conference
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WDC News

November 2011

Manos de Cristo Launched in Wichita

In a joyous bi-lingual service combining the musical talents of four churches, Gilberto Flores, Associate Conference Minister, installed Jerry Acosta as the church planter of Manos de Cristo Iglesia Menonita at Hope Mennonite Church on October 9. Jerry, his wife, Lori, and four children recently moved to Wichita. One avenue for new contacts for Pastor Jerry has been meeting other parents as he accompanies his children to and from their schools.

The new church plant is supported by the three congregations of Wichita: Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, Mennonite Church of the Servant, and Hope Mennonite Church. Together they have pledged \$40,000 in support for the first year and appointed members to a Support Committee. Nita Nikkel, chair of the Support Committee said, “It is such a blessing for all three

churches to work together. It will challenge us in our outreach in the community as Anglo churches.”



Jerry Acosta (left), Church Planter with Gilberto Flores, WDC Associate Conference Minister
Photo credit: Vada Snider for Mennonite Church USA

(Manos de Cristo continued)

Pastor Jaime Cazares of Iglesia Menonita Casa Betania, Newton, followed up contacts from Newton with a Bible study in Wichita as the initial seedling of this church plant. Conference Minister Flores saw the opportunity with 45,000 Hispanics in Wichita and began to consult with church leaders in February 2010.

The pathways to being involved in this church plant are varied. For example, Mennonite Church of the Servant made a commitment to practice seven spiritual disciplines in August 2009, according to Pastor Jerry Truex. One of those disciplines, peacemaking, was focused toward working with immigration. A further step was seeing the planting of a Hispanic church as a primary kingdom intervention in transforming relationships with immigrants by sharing the good news of kingdom citizenship.

Hope Mennonite Church celebrated their 25th anniversary in October 2010 and remembered how First Mennonite Church of Newton had provided generous financial assistance as well as seeded their worship with people who drove the thirty miles from Newton. Pastor Brett Dewey says, "After talking with many members of Hope, it became clear that God was on the move to remind us, not only that the last 25 years have been full of divine blessing for us, but that God wanted Hope to bless others in a similar way." Dewey notes, "Further possibilities might include Camp Mennoscah scholarships for the children of Manos de Cristo so that the youth of our churches grow in friendship through the years."

Nikkel says the Support Committee will need to be flexible in responding to God's guidance and provision. The Acostas were not able to find housing in the area initially targeted, and early connections with new people indicate that the church might be more bi-cultural and bi-lingual right from the beginning.

Manos de Cristo means "Hands of Christ." "That's a beautiful image of the church in the community," says Clarence Rempel, Conference Minister. "Ephesians 1:23 in *The Message* says, "The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence."



Installation service of Jerry Acosta

Photo credit: Vada Snider for Mennonite Church USA

Worshipping on a Playground?

With paintbrushes in hand, members of Beatrice Mennonite Church worshiped at a playground September 24.

Painting equipment at the park on a Sunday morning was a witness to God's presence in the community. The church, in the process of learning what it means to radically reorient itself to God's mission in the world, was saying to Beatrice, "We are here for you."

"This reorientation isn't about staging new events or organizing new programs," said John Regier, new pastor of the congregation since late August. "It's about existing for others and not just ourselves and reaching out beyond our church building."

"It means forming authentic friendships with our neighbors who are different than us. It's about worshipping God with our entire lives 24/7 and not for just one hour on Sundays—at home, at work, at the coffeeshop, at the kids' games. The Sunday adventure was a good first step toward this end," he said.

After Beatrice Mennonite's former pastor left in 2009, the 40 remaining attendees struggled with burnout and discouragement. They knew they were at a crossroads.

"Transitional pastor Bill Damberg helped the congregation explore four options," said John Hirschler, church board chair.

"We could continue to go on as we had been and die a slow death," he said. "We could close our doors immediately. We could merge with First Mennonite and/or share a pastor between us. Or, we could go for it by remaining as a church with a full-time pastor who would help us become a missional congregation."

Near the end of Damberg's ministry in June, the congregation voted to go for broke. It reoriented toward a new direction and remained as its own church with a full-time pastor.

"Today, members recognize that to remain viable, the congregation needs to reach out to others who don't come from a Russian German descent. There are people in our community who weren't brought up in faith and who are searching for Jesus and a church home," Hirschler said.

"Beatrice Mennonite's resurrection can inspire other rural-based congregations facing similar challenges," said Clarence Rempel, conference minister for Western District Conference. "WDC is committed to resourcing healthy, missional churches."



John Regier

(Adaptation of article by Laurie Oswald Robinson for Mennonite Weekly Review)