

“And even we pastors spend all our time and energy with Christians and have little time left to spend in outreach beyond the congregation. ... Our congregations can become satisfied with maintenance ... and fail to be exposed to the hurts of society. ... We so easily become prey to a we-they separation mentality.”

There was little of that kind of buffer for Dunn each week when he taught courses ranging from introduction to biblical literature to preaching to peacemaking and justice. While behind the bars with the men, Dunn was reminded of how the Lord’s grace brought him healing after his sex offense required a period away from ministry and subsequent reconciliation with the church.

“You often hear the phrase, ‘there but for the grace of God go I,’ and that is so true for me,” he said. “There is not a day in my teaching that I didn’t realize that I am a sinner also and that I have violated the law. God’s grace is wonderfully sufficient for all.”

Oklahoma Convention restarts

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

The decision to resurrect the annual convention for Oklahoma congregations on March 10 was a prayerful and careful one as members of eight active congregations met at Grace Mennonite Church in Enid, Okla. It had been seven years since the last gathering.

“Creating a vision statement, as well as gathering again, are some of the first steps we’re taking to pull us back together again,” said Bob Koehn, chair of the executive convention planning committee and a member of Koinonia Mennonite Church in Clinton.

“That vision includes a renewed focus on fostering fellowship and service in the name of Jesus Christ through church planting, shepherding of the flock and helping the needy,” he said.

“Our gathering was a real encouragement to us. It helped us begin to revitalize our congregations and take a new direction as we become more responsive to Christ’s call within our body of congregations,” said Bob.

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WDC News

April 2012

Search for a people planted strongly in Jesus’ way leads couple to plant church

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Karen and Steve Mascho have been called to become the kind of people they had been seeking for years to find – living and serving in Jesus’ way in loving community.

Fifteen months after they were first introduced to Mennonites, they began planting a new congregation, Grace Mennonite Church, in Gladewater, Texas, in July 2011. The tiny congregation that meets in a low-income housing development reaches out to the marginalized with Jesus’ love in close-knit community.

It is striving to live in Jesus’ way of openness, welcome and grace rather than in a closed system of judgment, rules and criticism.

“I was raised in a church that was works-based,” Karen said. “I always willed to do better but then fall short. Works, rather than grace, was drilled into my head. I longed to find a people who saw God at work, and then joined God in that because of their love for him.”

The couple found that prevailing attitude among Mennonites, and soon found themselves guiding a tiny band of newcomers to the Anabaptist faith. The task is large. But Karen, a special needs teacher, and Steve, involved in a motorcycle ministry, are not daunted. They know it is God’s work, not theirs.

“We have a deep sense that this has been a God thing and not our thing,” Karen said. “A year ago, we could not have dreamed we would be doing what we are doing now.”



The dream was awakened when the couple was first introduced to Mennonites at the Amish-Mennonite Information Center in Shipshewana, Ind. After returning home, Karen researched Mennonites online. She found a Web site created by Paul Williams, an associate pastor at Mechanic Grove Mennonite Church in Quarryville, Pa., which served to deepen their budding Anabaptist beliefs.

In April 2011, they visited Plough Creek, a Mennonite intentional fellowship in Tiskilwa, Ill., which solidified their decision to become Mennonite. They searched in vain for a Mennonite congregation in their area. So they called Mennonite Church USA/Mennonite Mission Network to ask if a missionary could be sent down to their area.

“Mauricio Chenlo told me that since there is not a church in our community, we should consider ourselves church planters, and to connect with Gilberto Flores, Western District Conference (WDC) associate conference minister,” she said.

That connection led them to a church planting seminar in May 2011 in Oklahoma City. While at the conference they met members of Metro Mennonite Church, another new WDC church plant in Oklahoma City.

“Steve and I had begun to feel that we were down here all by ourselves, but the folks at Metro adopted us as associate members and made themselves available to us,” she said.

When they returned home, the couple learned that some people in the housing complex wanted to start a Bible study. So Karen drew together a handful of people for the first fellowship meal and study, and Grace Mennonite, was born.

“Grace” fits the congregation, which draws people from the margins of society, many of them previously unchurched. They gather on Thursdays and Sundays and support each other at other times during the week at such events as AA meetings.

She believes that while Anabaptist communities aren’t perfect, they strive to model Jesus loving others as God loves us within the context of mutual care in community.

“I’ve always been lonely, because I saw people at church but never really connected with them during the week,” she said. “And I’ve seen lots of churches splitting over differences as meaningless as what kind of carpet to put in the sanctuary.

“Mennonites strive to agree and disagree in love. Yes, we’re all human, and we’re going to be infected by that. ... But we continue to say that this is the goal.”

The couple is experiencing this quality care. They recently began an online distance education program offered by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and both engage regularly with a mentor. For now, they are guiding the little band of the faithful with studies such as the Purpose Driven Life and worshipping with praise DVDs.

“This formation is essential for building a foundation for ministry, as is a passion for Jesus and loving and serving others in his name,” said Norman Berry, pastor of Metro Mennonite and Steve’s mentor.

“Many people may have an enthusiasm for a certain theological perspective, but when it comes to the actual work of the church, they don’t want to get involved,” Berry said. “Not so with Karen and Steve. ... They are willing to get their hands dirty.

“They know ministry is not a 9 to 5 thing. It is 24-7. They are willing to learn from others about being good ministers, but they are also willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of that ministry.”

Ministry sets pastor free to learn from imprisoned men

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Even though Jim Dunn retired in December from eight years of teaching at Ellsworth Correctional Facility, the lessons he learned there will remain with him forever.

As he taught courses on behalf of Pastoral Ministries Program at Hesston (Kan.) College, Dunn witnessed how inmates imprisoned for crimes of murder, rape and drugs were transformed by Christ into men with new purpose and hope.

It was the kind of classroom he hasn’t attended in Sunday school in traditional churches. And it is the kind of classroom he wishes more fellow Christians could experience.

“One of the great tragedies of Christendom in our day is that Christians huddle together and don’t realize God loves all people,” said Dunn, pastor at Burrton (Kan.) Mennonite Church. “All people can receive God’s restoration and inclusion and love.”



Jim and Ann Dunn