**WDC READERS’ THEATER for WDC CELEBRATION OF 125 YEARS**

**“Rooted and Built up in Jesus and Established in the Faith”**

**Presented on August 4, 2017, at WDC Annual Assembly, Arlington, TX**

**(with quotes/info taken directly from David Haury, Brian Stucky, Heidi Regier Kreider, Lou Gomez, Dorothy Nickel Friesen, . . . )**

**READERS 1 and 3 = Male; READERS 2 and 4 = Female**

READER 2: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . In *our* beginning was the Kansas Conference, an 1877-meeting of teachers of the German Word . . .

READER 1: . . . who met at the country school west of Goessel, Kansas--70 passionate attenders from 10 different churches, excluding NO ONE—even those whose beliefs were somewhat different!

READER 3: and stood together at the little country school, where there was no room to sit . . .

READER 4: and talked until past midnight about their goals.

READER 2: Their notes say: “True and thorough knowledge is not contradictory to the true knowledge of God; on the contrary, it promotes the same, for no one who is thoroughly educated will deny the existence of a God, Creator, and Preserver of the universe. . . it can never be our task as Christians to close our minds . . .”

READER 1. Streams of diverse Mennonites from diverse locations, South Germans, Prussians, Volynian Swiss, Polish Russians, Galicians . . .

READER 4: (not to be mistaken for Galatians!)

READER 3: . . . and more—the most diverse group of Mennonites joined together in the United States now united by their concern for education and the Word.

READER 4: Before this first conference became the Western District Conference in 1892, Bethel College was founded by a private corporation as a kind of sister institution, serving the church and the broader community as the first Mennonite college in the U.S.

READER 1: –two institutions who cared deeply about the Word . . .

READER 2: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

READER 3: The “Reiseprediger,” Itinerant Traveling Preacher, was an important early figure for the fledgling Western District Conference . . .

READER 4: (*interrupting*) People were moving into Nebraska, western Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, northern Texas . . . How would they remain strong in the faith? How would they stay in touch?

READER 3: (*continuing)*—The Reiseprediger traveled far and stayed to help: sometimes just a day, sometimes a month, depending upon the congregation’s needs.

READER 1: Perhaps they needed a pastor for Communion or baptism or even to teach catechism.

READER 2: In small settlements, he made pastoral visits to each family or tried to help settle disputes.

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READER 3: (*with sadness*) . . .It was always a “he.”

READER 4: But things change . . .

READER 1: “Roots bring nourishment and water to the plant.”

READER 2: “Roots are like the foundations of a building, firmly established to give stability and strength to the structure above the ground.”

READER 3: Being firmly grounded, being well-rooted, allows for change.

READER 2: Gertrude Ummel lived in western Kansas at Ransom. After the pastor of the Ransom church died, the Western District Conference helped provide preaching . . .

READER 1: . . . but as Sunday school superintendent, Gertrude became the first female leader of a Western District congregation.

READER 4: It was during the same time that women got the right to vote in this country, 1920.

READER 1: Typically, women had only attended evening worship services or mission festivals at conference, not the business meetings.

READER 2: Gertrude Ummel was the first woman to attend the Western District meeting in 1921 with her husband, David.

READER 3: Women and men still sat on opposite sides of the church in many congregations, and the men had the leadership roles.

READER 1: In 1940, only 25 of the 317 Western District Conference delegates were women.

READER 4: Of course, lots of the representatives on Western District committees were pastors, and (*downcast*) . . . there were no women pastors. . .

READER 3: until . . .

READER 1: (*an excited interruption!*) The Western District Loan Library began in 1938; it was primarily women who selected the books!

READER 3: (*continuing)* until . . .

READER 2: “so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. . . .

READER 3: until . . .

READER 4: (*with a sigh)* It would be another 50 years before Marilyn Kaufman Miller was ordained by the WDC in Arvada, Colorado in 1976, and then Rosella Epp at Lorraine Avenue in 1979 and then Patty Shelly and Lois Barrett and Dorothy Nickel Friesen, all in 1985.

READER 1: Dorothy Nickel Friesen was the first woman to serve as conference minister

READER 2: (*interrupts*) and the WDC is also a leader among conferences with pastoral couples, with at least 15 married couples serving in ministry over the years!

ALL: PRAISE GOD FOR STRONG LEADERSHIP IN THE WDC!

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READER 2: “so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God . . .

READER 1: By 1932, the WDC had 10,000 members; but its membership began to change in the 1950s and 1960s as rural churches lost membership and the urbanization of the conference began.

READER 3: (*thoughtfully . . .* ) In some ways, the WDC continues today to try to figure out how to be a conference for our urban churches. Even in the mid-1950s, Paul Peachy said, “Mennonites must be told simply and bluntly: Not everything that is rural is for that reason Christian.” (from Haury)

READER 4: Among the earliest church plants were the mission stations among Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche and Arapahoe Indians in 1894 at Clinton, Oklahoma. This early church plant became today’s Koinonia Church, where Lawrence and Betty Hart have pastored for so many years.

READER 1: In 1898 at Hammon, Oklahoma, a church plant was among the Red Moon Cheyennes . . .

READER 2: Later, Home Missions came to mean church plants in the cities where Mennonites had migrated, places like McPherson, Kansas, or Clinton, Oklahoma, or Topeka, Kansas, or Kansas City. And in recent decades, church plants have added even more geographic and ethnic diversity to WDC, with congregations in places like Houston, San Antonia, Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Oklahoma City, worshiping in Spanish, English, Chin and Garifuna.

READER 3: Planting churches in the city now is not like they did it in the 1890s when the Reiseprediger could “locate a district schoolhouse, begin a Sunday school, and hope a congregation would come together.”

READER 4: Today, . . .well, it happens in God’s way and God’s time.

READER 1: Pastor Lou Gomez was commuting from Newton to Calvary Mennonite Church in Liberal in the southwest corner of Kansas for weekend services. On Saturday mornings he liked to sit in the sanctuary praying, asking God to fill this place with his Spirit and Light.

READER 4: One Saturday morning, two men who he described as looking like they could be his Hispanic brothers stood beside him as suddenly as if he were visited by angels.

READER 3: . . . Christians, leading a group in Bible study and prayer, looking for a place to worship. They passed the church on the way to work. Could they possibly rent a place to worship?

READER 2: “For this reason we have not ceased praying for you . . . so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” (from Colossians 1:3-6, 9-10)

READER 1: : In this way Moises Romero began his leadership of Iglesia Camino de Santidad; Lou and Liz Gomez shared their Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs, Calvary shared its sanctuary for the new group of believers, and WDC conference ministers offered counsel.

READER 3: Today Iglesia Camino de Santidad has grown to over 60 members as one of WDC’s church plants.

READER 4: They are influencing the community of Liberal, Kansas for good.

READER 3: Gracias a Dios!

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READER 2: ”Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God”

READER 1: We are even more diverse today.

READER 2: And we are still working at unity!

READER 3: “Nonconformity, community, nonresistance, and evangelical mission remain important principles,” said our conference historian David Haury more than three decades ago.

READER 4: Once, we disagreed about the Revised Standard Version versus the King James.

READER 1: Today we disagree about how to interpret Scripture . . .

READER 3: how to face wars, how to vote, gender issues, globalism, ecumenical movements;

READER 2: Once our people didn’t want to support Bethel College unless it was a Bible college.

READER 4: Today, our students often do not choose a Mennonite college, and we fear we will lose them as leaders in the Mennonite church.

READER 1: We grieve for churches who have been a part of us for many years and now have left. . . for diminishing rural churches whose children have moved to other communities.

READER 2: We grieve for our children who have left the Mennonite church.

READER 3: Yet, we celebrate our new and vibrant congregations who often show us the way.

READER 1: We celebrate old rural congregations who have found a way to thrive in their witness.

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READER 4: Why are we rooted and built up in Christ?

READER 1: Not merely for our own preservation!

READER 2: “to share the good news of God’s grace with others” (Heidi)

READER 3: “and join God’s work of healing and hope in the world.” (Heidi)

READER 4: “Bearing fruit is a sign of health and vitality, and assures continuity of life” (Heidi)

READER 1: If we have a future, we build it on our past, rooted in the passion that brought those first very different Mennonites together. . .

READER 2: and moved with them to new rural communities and to the city . . .

READER 3: and recognized new leadership . . .

READER 4: and sought God’s work in the world where they found it already happening . . .

READER 1: and kept the faith in the word . . .

READER 2: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him . . .

READER 3: . . . rooted and built up in him and established in the faith . . .

READER 4: . . . just as you were taught,

READER 1: abounding in thanksgiving.”

--Written by Raylene Hinz-Penner

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