

WDC voices add to chorus opposing Kansas death penalty

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Kansas congregations in Western District Conference (WDC) will soon add their voices to the gathering chorus of opposition to the state's death penalty. That's because WDC's End Death Penalty Task Force by the end of this year is inviting each church to appoint a representative to stage a letter-writing campaign and to aid in congregational education.

This invitation is dovetailing with the strong likelihood that in their 2014 session, Kansas state legislators and senators will vote on whether or not to replace the state's death penalty with a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole. After a long hiatus, the death penalty was re-instated in 1994 after the U.S. Supreme Court declared that each state must determine the matter on its own.



The possibility of a vote is cheering on the efforts of WDC, including task force members and Steven Becker, State Representative, 104th District, and a lifetime member of Buhler Mennonite Church. He recently met with the task force to help galvanize their efforts along with Kristin Bollig, Topeka area coordinator of the Kansas Coalition Against the Death Penalty (KCADP).

"In American jurisprudence, there is no such thing as absolute certainty," said Becker, a retired district court judge. "How can we impose the irreversible absolute certainty of death when we do not require the absolute certainty of guilt? There continues to be exonerations of death row inmates. As long as there exists even the possibility of execution of an innocent there must be no executions."

Becker said his engagement with an imperfect criminal justice system and his Anabaptist formation fuel his passion for changing the law. He is introducing House Bill 2397 (a similar bill is being introduced in the Senate) that calls for a change in the law. Becker's bill also calls for the establishment of a fund managed by the attorney general for the benefit of victims' families.

Peter Goerzen, task force chair and pastor of Grace Hill Mennonite Church in Whitewater, Kan., is hopeful that the law can be replaced. "We know that there is support in both chambers through Steven in the House and Carolyn McGinnin the Senate," Goerzen said. "We also know that opposition to the death penalty cuts across ideological and theological lines and reflects some universally-held values. ... For me personally, opposition to the death penalty gives me an opportunity to witness for peace and reconciliation and to be a light that shines in the darkness."

Western District Conference's statement on the death penalty (2009) can be viewed at: <http://mennowdc.org/committees-task-forces/> (scroll to "End Death Penalty Task Force"). Task Force members (Peter Goerzen, Stan Bohn, Duane Friesen, Tim Huber, Jim Juhnke, Jeff Koller, Eric Massanari and Miles Reimer) will call Kansas churches to invite congregations to name a death penalty representative.

 Western District Conference is a regional grouping of Mennonite Church USA congregations located in Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas.

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Coming Events

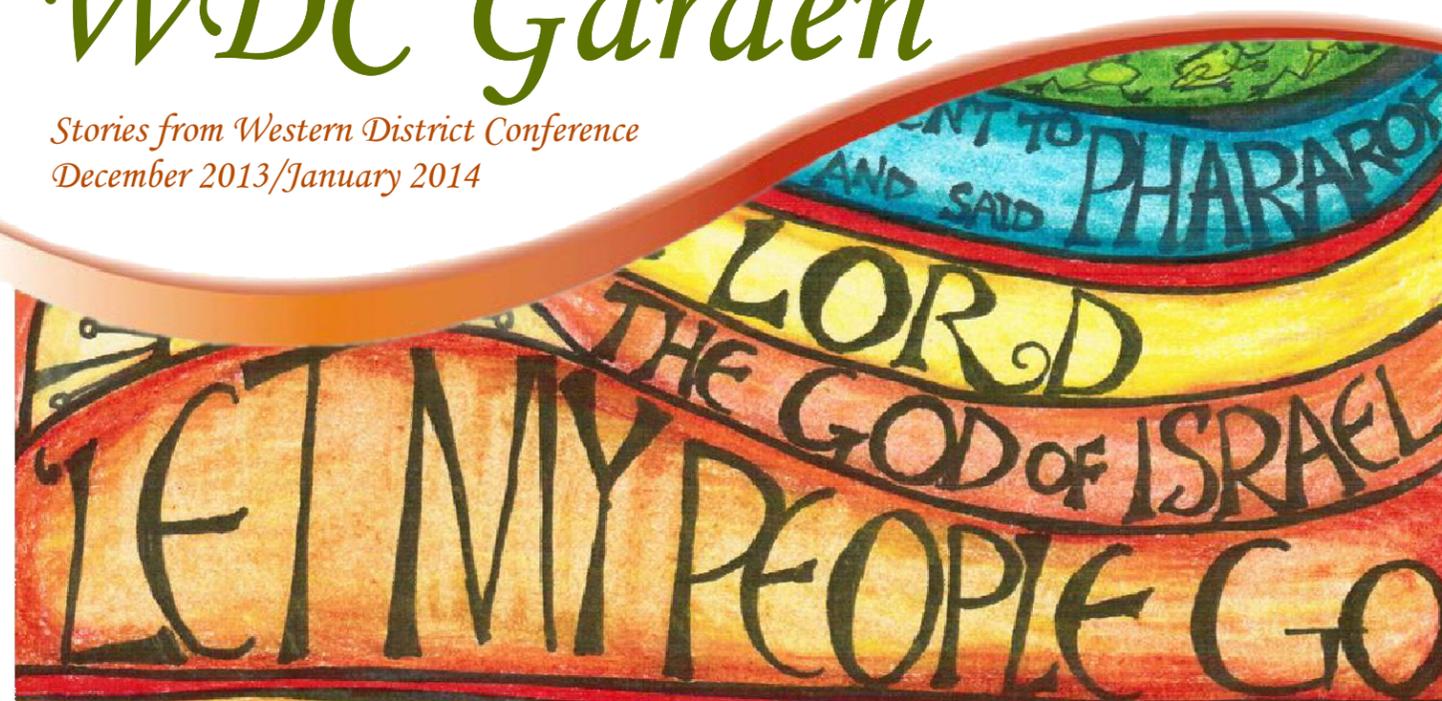
NEW! Beginning December 7, the WDC Resource Library will be open the first Saturday of each month from 10 am - 12 pm. Bring the children for a brief story time from 10:30-10:40.

January 18, 2014
Lent Planner
Tabor Mennonite Church
Newton, KS

July 4-6, 2014
WDC Annual Assembly
Lakeview Camp & Retreat Ctr.
Waxahachie, TX

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference
December 2013/January 2014



Year of the Bible in WDC congregations

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Scripture Doodles at Hope Mennonite Church, Wichita, Kan.

As the congregation engages this fall in a survey of the Old Testament, members may mediate on key verses through scripture doodles created by artist Joanna Pinkerton. Worshippers every Sunday morning are invited to color a doodling page as a way to muse upon the verse of the week.

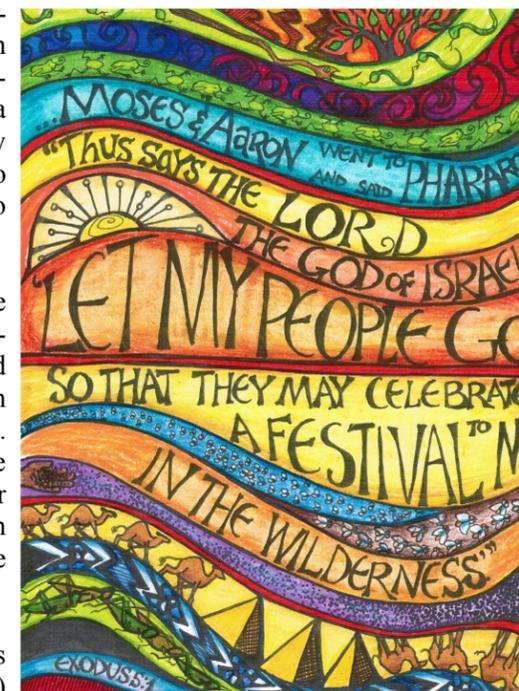
"I believe art can help people be attentive to God in ways that provide a wonder factor about God rather than spelling it all out in black and white," Pinkerton said. "Some people better internalize scripture through images rather than words, and these doodles can help them better memorize the verses."

The key-verse doodles (samples shown here and on next page)

Pinkerton creates are linked with topics that include the Genesis account of creation, the patriarchs as Abraham and Noah, the journey of the people of Israel and prayers and laments found in some of the psalms, including

Psalms 1:1-3. "In this one, I created a tree in the middle of the page with its roots growing down into the water," she said. "To create these doodles, I myself am called to reflect more deeply on the biblical passage and then to re-create that reflection in images that symbolize the words in the verse."

Pinkerton said she received some of her inspiration through Joanne Fink's book, *Zenspirations: Letters and Patterning*. Samples of the coloring sheets for scripture doodles can be downloaded from Western District Conference's Year of the Bible web site at www.yearofthebiblenetwork.org/.



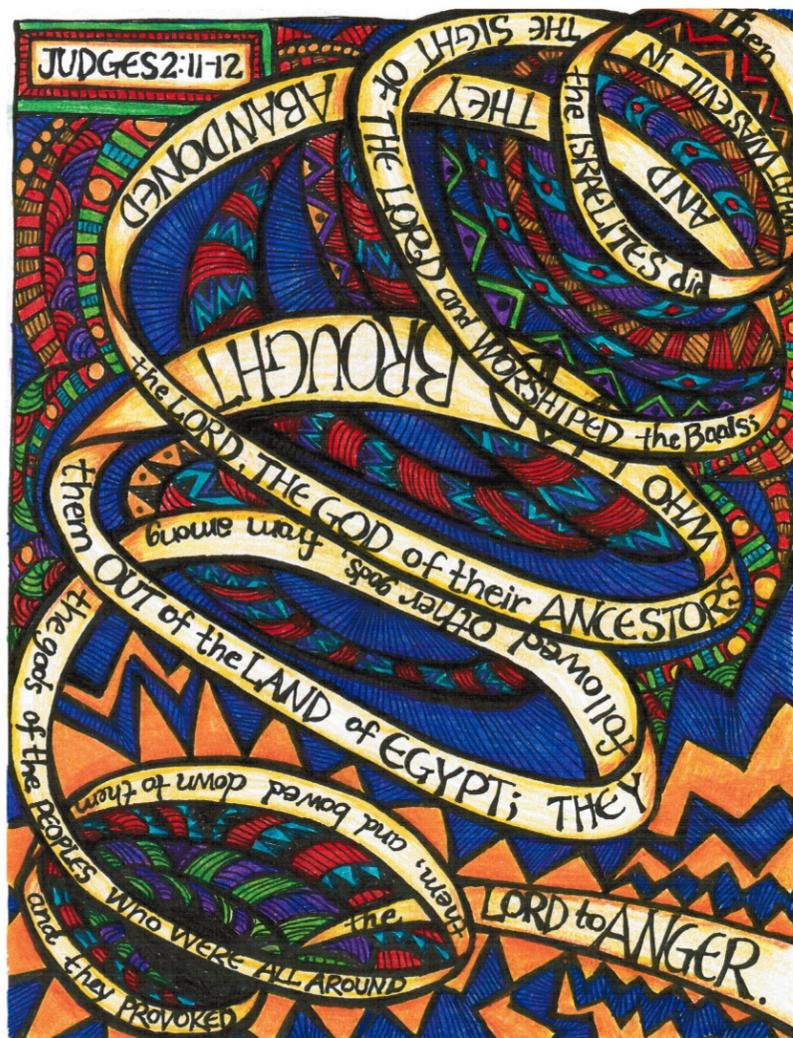
The Scriptures and Visual Arts at Bethel College Mennonite Church, North Newton, Kan.

Norma Johnson and Dotty Janzen recently provided a Wednesday evening tour of visual art. Passages of scripture were placed at varying stations of art so that tour goers could connect the images with corresponding biblical accounts. “There was not a lot of conversation,” Johnson said. “We wanted to provide a non-directed atmosphere to give people freedom to move through the art as they chose.”

After a half hour of touring, Janzen shared a prayer of blessing for creativity. This evening was one of eight such Wednesday programs that are celebrating how the arts - including music and drama - help people to connect with the Bible.

The evening of visual art included wooden figures carved by John Gaeddert including the Nativity and the Samaritan woman at the well. Other stations included well-known paintings including depictions of the Road to Emmaus, the calling of the first two disciples, Simon and Andrew and the prodigal son.

Other stations provided children’s books, including a playful rendering of Christ’s birth in *The Nativity*, illustrated by Julie Vivas. Yet another station displayed images that are close to Johnson’s heart - photographs of the stained-glass windows in the sanctuary of her childhood congregation, Casselton (N.D.) Mennonite Church.



For example, one window depicted a pelican nipping at its breast, causing drops of blood to drip down. “We learned that this was a symbol of the love and sacrifice of Christ,” Johnson said. “Because of these windows, at a very early age, I learned how visual art can powerfully connect us with scripture.”

Explore the Psalms at Inman (Kan.) Mennonite Church

This congregation is providing a plan for reading through the Psalms one chapter each day from October 1 through March 8, 2014, said Pastor Eric Buller. “When I went to the Year of the Bible Launch in August, a workshop leader shared how reading the Psalms is a good first choice because of the familiarity many people have with it,” he said. “I personally am getting a lot out of this exercise, because it is helping me to see things I have never seen in the text before.

“For example, I am picking up in a new way how the psalms ... are so personal, and how the songs of lament and crying out to God are so honest. I am also being reassured that I can trust God in the challenges of life. God is at work, even in the midst of David’s suffering and the paranoid feelings he experiences in being surrounded by trouble and his enemies.”



Share how you and your congregation are engaging with WDC’s YEAR OF THE BIBLE by emailing mbogard@mennowdc.org.

A Conversation That Can Hold Us Together

by Paul Schrag and Clarence Rempel

Can the church hold together while its members talk about homosexuality? Western District Conference (WDC) tested that question Oct. 26, and those who took part saw signs of hope. More than 130 people gathered at Faith Mennonite Church in Newton, Kan., for a symposium on “The Church and Homosexuality: A Conversation That Can Hold Us Together.”

The goal of the event, planned and led by WDC’s Human Sexuality Discernment Task Force, was that Christians with profound ethical disagreement would engage each other in respectful conversation and theological reflection. Evaluations indicated that this was indeed the experience for most participants.

One described the symposium as modeling vigorous discussion in an atmosphere of deep listening and respect while representing a variety of viewpoints. Many noted that other sexual matters also need the church’s attention, including pornography, the exploitation of sex, premarital sex, rape, and healing ministries for those wounded by sexual violence.

The main presenters were Keith Graber Miller, professor of Bible, religion and philosophy at Goshen (Ind.) College, and David Boshart, executive conference minister of Central Plains Conference.

Boshart had been asked to give the rationale for Mennonite Church USA’s position. He advocated welcoming gay and lesbian people in the church while not supporting same-sex marriage as a ministry of the church. “We do not find scriptural affirmation for sexual intimacy between two people of the same gender from a plain reading of the text,” he said.

For guidance on same-sex relationships, Boshart said, we should look to Jesus, who understood marriage as a unique relationship between a man and a woman. “Because God makes marriage, we cannot simply choose to apply ‘marriage’ to whatever other socially constructed relationships we want. Jesus practiced radical hospitality but not radical inclusion,” Boshart said, “and the church should do the same. Jesus was always welcoming but not unconditionally affirming.”

Graber Miller argued that same-sex relationships can be loving, pure, just and fruitful and that the church should bless and honor them. He said there is no evidence that biblical writers knew of genuine same-sex orientation. He said they condemned abusive acts but did not address loving relationships. When the Bible addresses homosexual acts, “in every case the context suggests idolatry, violent rape, lust, unnatural behaviors or exploitation.”

The church has long acknowledged the reality of same-sex orientation, Graber Miller said. “Would it not be good to channel those orientations into loving, God-blessed commitments marked by monogamy and fidelity, supported and held accountable by bodies of believers?” he asked.

Graber Miller called for living with “the grace of uncertainty” — because we all see through a glass darkly, it is best to offer our views with a measure of humility.

Four people gave responses to Boshart and Graber Miller: a theologian, a pastor, a lesbian and a woman who has renounced same-sex attraction and is married to a man.

The presenters answered questions from participants, who were grateful for the open, honest conversation. Many hoped for this kind of dialogue in their congregations.

The pastor’s heart

by Clarence Rempel, Conference Minister

How do we care for our relationships in the body of Christ in times of profound ethical disagreement? The instructions of Romans 14-15 were addressed to the house churches in Rome in that kind of distress. They still speak to us today.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord.

For the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Let us respond as we did at the symposium - **We hear your truth, Lord; help us to do it.**