

The Pastor's Heart

by Clarence Rempel, Conference Minister



Dorothy Nickel Friesen, Clarence Rempel and Heidi Regier Kreider

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). A serendipity meeting of past, present, and future conference ministers in the Resource Library illustrates the movement of God's calling on our lives for a chapter of ministry. I witnessed many God appointments in the personal and congregational stories that led to 39 pastor installations, 19 pastor ordinations and five new church plants in the past six years.

I am grateful for this time of serving as Western District Conference Minister, as a pastor to pastors, and as an elder to churches. It has been an opportunity to trust in God at a new depth and to see many miracles of God working in the hearts of his people. My frequent and ongoing prayer has been "I am weak and I need thy strength and pow'r to help me over my weakest hour. Help me through the darkness, thy face to see. Lead me, O Lord, lead me" (*Hymnal Worship Book* (HWB) #553).

It has been a hard time in the ethical, theological, and relational realignments with ten churches leaving Western District. Three churches closed. It has been a blessed time in that churches are making the slow turn from being a church *in* the community to being a church *for* the community as evidenced by the Loaves and Fishes grants below. My prayer for the church is "Renew your church, its ministries restore, both to serve and adore. Make it again as salt throughout the land and as light from a stand. 'Mid somber shadows of the night where greed and hatred spread their blight, O send us forth with pow'r endued. Help us, God, be renewed" (HWB #363).

Loaves & Fishes Grant

The Western District Conference Resource Commission is offering \$500 *Loaves and Fishes Grants* to WDC congregations who are seeking to multiply God's grace in their communities. To date, eight (out of 20 maximum) have been awarded:

- First (Halstead, KS) - Community projects (home repair, etc.)
- West Zion (Moundridge, KS) - Wednesday night meals for K-4th graders
- Lorraine Avenue (Wichita, KS) - Portable mini craft/makerspace for kids
- Rainbow (Kansas City, KS) - Advocacy for community housing living conditions
- First (McPherson, KS) - Outdoor prayer garden
- Trinity (Hillsboro, KS) - Summer lunches for children
- Tabor (Newton, KS) - Inviting community families to the Church Retreat
- Alexanderwohl (Goessel, KS) - Community Service Day

Don't miss this opportunity to reach out in love and build relationships with your surrounding community. Grants are available until September 1, 2015. See complete information and application form at: <http://mennowdc.org/resources/grants/>

Coming Events

June 12-13
Anabaptist Faith Formation—Growing in Christ Launch
Bethel College, North Newton KS

June 28, 2:30-5:00 pm
Clarence Rempel come/go farewell
WDC Office, North Newton KS

June 30 –July 5
Mennonite Church USA Convention
Kansas City KS

Oct. 30-31
WDC Annual Assembly
Bethel College, North Newton KS

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference
June/July/August 2015



West Zion Mennonite Church

Two WDC churches plow up the old, plant the new

by Laurie Oswald Robinson for Western District Conference

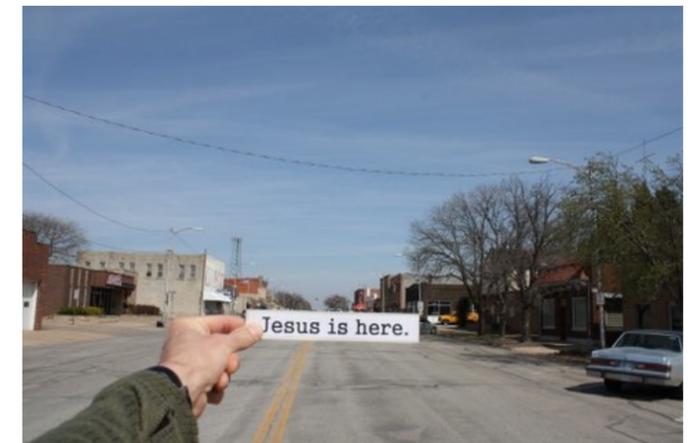
Seed bombs is a phrase that West Zion Mennonite Church's pastor, Brad Roth, uses these days to symbolize the congregation's friendship evangelism in the rural Kansas community of Moundridge.

He borrowed the phrase from a *Washington Post* article about "guerilla gardeners." They toss golf-ball sized lumps of seeds, clay and compost into abandoned lots in cities such as Baltimore. As the seeds grow, eyesore blocks become bountiful plots of wildflowers and vegetables.

"I think a seed bomb is a good image of what it means to spread the gospel by taking our cues from Jesus, such as in the parable of the sower and the scattering of seed," he said. "This involves cultivating a new culture of encouraging all of us at West Zion to share Christ's love with our neighbors."

Toward that end, West Zion replaced its committee structure with five ministry teams in 2014. The Missional Team guides the congregation's efforts in a region where the gospel has deep roots, and yet there are still people who do not connect with a congregation. According to Roth, the situation is

not exactly the post-Christendom of Europe or the coasts. Rather, the issue is more one of "de-churched" who have disconnected from church because of hurt or disillusionment.



It is to some of these longtime neighbors as well as to newcomers that West Zion members are directing their loving attention. This includes visits to newcomers' homes with freshly-baked cookies in hand. It also includes inviting people to church who haven't been to one in years. Church families sometimes invite people into their homes for meals or treat them to a meal at a restaurant.

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

Western District Conference

PO Box 306, 2517 N Main, North Newton, KS 67117



316-283-6300

wdc@mennowdc.org

www.mennowdc.org

“All churches nowadays have to attract brand new people,” said Dan Pohl, Mission Team chair. “The population of our church is aging. Young adults are going away to college and not coming home. We are trying anything and everything to put our name out there – such as taking out newspaper ads.



“Every chance we get, we want to say, ‘Hey, we are here for you.’ We need to meet people exactly where they are at on their spiritual journey, rather than fitting them into our programs or agenda.”

“The refocus is gaining steam, and a few newcomers are making West Zion their spiritual home,” Roth said. “A few neighbors of church members are connecting to us in new ways, and I can see that the faith of people who have gone through some kind of spiritual crisis is being rekindled.”

Shalom plows up old system to plant new ministry seed

The rekindling of faith is also happening at Shalom Mennonite Church in Newton, Kan., said congregational leaders in recent interviews.

The flames of ministry passion that had burned bright in the church’s early years were beginning to dwindle. Too much committee work had left members burned out.

This weariness evoked a congregational review in 2014. The process has yielded radical changes. Changes that since spring 2015 are engaging people in less bureaucracy and more ministry, said Barth Hague, chair of Shalom’s congregational board.

“People were burning out because they had too much on their plate, and we weren’t getting to some of the things that we, as a congregation, felt were important,” Hague said. “So, we brainstormed and

‘blue skied’ it, asking people to articulate their dreams of what they wanted Shalom to look like.”

The congregation replaced five- to seven-person committees and a ten-person coordinating council with smaller, grassroots ministry teams and a seven-person congregational board, Hague said. This is setting more people free to be part of flexible, personalized ministries. The teams are created by people who will serve on them to do specific tasks in a specific time frame.

For example, one ministry team just handles food preparation for funerals. Another team is developing a welcoming statement. One team is assisting with congregational care. Worship teams also plan worship for a season of the church year, such as Advent or Lent, rather than serving for two or three years.

Rob Burdette, Shalom’s transitional pastor, has helped the congregation reconfigure. Burdette also helped West Zion with its first flush of change in 2012.

“One thing that has become apparent to me is that many congregations are still structured for the 1960s and 1970s,” he said. “They are inward focused, preserving and maintaining themselves rather than focusing outward. At Shalom, our job descriptions for pastors are changing too, with the expectation that they will use one-third of their time to engage in the community.”

Similar to West Zion, everyone is being encouraged to reach out to people where they live, rather than expecting people to fit into a church program, he said.

“We need to let the Spirit grow the church as we connect with people at the local coffee shop, or on the city league ball field. God lives outside the church, too,” Burdette said.



Shalom’s Structure Inquiry Task Force led the process of restructuring. L-R: Barth Hague, Debbie Schmidt, Marathana Prothro, Rob Burdette

WDC continues discernment on resolution regarding congregational freedom and same-sex unions

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

WICHITA, Kan. – Western District Conference (WDC) leaders continued their year-long discernment process regarding whether congregations will be freed to sanction same-sex covenanted unions at Reference Council on April 11 at Hope Mennonite Church, Wichita. A resolution granting such freedom was submitted by Rainbow Mennonite Church, Kansas City, at the WDC annual meeting in summer 2014. About 120 participants discussed the impact of such permission on WDC congregations and the conference’s relationship to Mennonite Church USA in preparation for a delegate vote on the resolution in late October.

The resolution calls for allowing individual congregations to discern how homosexuality will be subject to biblical interpretation. Also, the resolution calls for granting pastors – with affirmation of their local congregation – the freedom to officiate, or to refuse to officiate, ceremonies that consecrate monogamous, life-long unions, regardless of the sexual orientation of those being united.

WDC’s resolution vote on October 31 will occur after deliberations on the issues at Mennonite Church USA’s denominational July delegate sessions in Kansas City. There delegates will vote on a resolution that invites area conferences during this time of uncertainty to forbear on their differences regarding same-sex unions. A recent whirlwind of unrest has been stirred by decisions of some area conferences and congregations that vary with denominational membership and ministerial guidelines.

The denomination currently states in its founding documents that marriage is between one man and one woman for life; and pastors are not to officiate ceremonies for any other kind of union. The implication is that conferences are not to license non-celibate homosexuals as pastors. The binding quality of the documents – not currently scheduled for review or change — is being tested by some area conferences.

Patty Shelly, moderator-elect of Mennonite Church USA gave a report to the Reference Council on behalf of the denomination’s Executive Board (EB) and Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) on the is-

sues. She said the results of a denominational delegate survey as of April 11 indicated that delegates were about evenly divided on the Membership Guidelines forbidding same-sex unions in terms of its support and usefulness. “This shows how divided we are,” she said.

A main component of the EB resolution in Kansas City asks delegates to recommit to living with one another and looking to area conferences to interpret and implement current documents in mutual accountability with other conferences through CLC, she said.

“While Kansas City will be important, the assembly will not resolve our ongoing conflict but will focus on forbearing with each other and recommitting,” Shelly said. “Some congregations have not waited and others will make decisions soon after the summer convention. We will continue to live in a time of uncertainty and pain.”

If the WDC resolution is adopted, Shelly said that being “at variance” will depend on what will happen in Kansas City with the resolutions. However, she stated that when one conference makes decisions, it affects us all. “When WDC acts, it will impact others.”



Reference Council participants discussed both their uncertainties regarding the area conference’s future vote and the accountability they feel for the denomination. As tools to grapple with these tensions, table group participants responded in writing to three sets of questions on intent, impact and whether a simple majority or 2/3 majority should be required for adopting the resolution.