

Comments from the Conference Minister

By Heidi Regier Kreider

WDC Assembly was preceded by a Pastors' Afternoon Apart on Friday, with presentations on the topic *In Chains of Peace: Ephesians and the Unity of the Church* by Tom Yoder Neufeld (Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Conrad Grebel University College; author of the Believers' Bible Commentary on Ephesians) and Chuck Neufeld (retired Conference Minister for Illinois Conference). Tom noted that our assembly theme, "Held Together in Christ," is a radical challenge even for a peace church! He suggested the image of a vacuum cleaner to describe God's cosmic plan to "gather up all things in Christ." (Ephesians 1:10). This ingathering brings together adversaries and strangers to create one new humanity marked not by serenity and similarity but – like vacuum cleaner bag contents – by the realities of broken human lives, diversity and even conflict. All are drawn together into the common ground of relationship with Christ, bound together by God's grace and called to live out the peace that God has accomplished in Christ. (see Ephesians 2:11-22). I thought of this as I observed the recent WDC Assembly. How grateful I am for each congregation and person in WDC, as we are gathered together in Christ.

In my State of the Conference report, I noted significant transitions and initiatives since last Assembly:

- Staff changes: Retirement of Conference Minister Clarence Rempel; resignation of Marlene Bogard, Minister of Christian Nurture / Resource Librarian; Gilberto Flores' retirement followed by Howard Garver's service as Associate Conference Minister from January to August. Thanks to God for the dedicated work of each of these persons, and for the continuing WDC staff.
- WDC now seeks new staff: A ¼ time Resource Library Director; a ¾ time Associate Conference Minister to work with Resource Commission and support pastors/congregations in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas; and a full-time Associate Conference Minister to work with Church Planting Commission and support pastors/congregations in Texas.
- 12 pastors/youth leaders and 7 interim pastors began in WDC congregations, and 7 pastors were ordained.
- 33 WDC pastors and other congregation members participated in training at the Kansas Leadership Center, through a Leadership Transformation Grant.
- Iglesia Menonita Nueva Jerusalem (Houston, TX) and Mennonite Indian Church (Seiling, OK), and Burrton (KS) Mennonite Church closed; Iglesia Menonita Mi Redentor (Dallas, TX) and First Mennonite Church (Clinton, OK) withdrew from WDC. I give thanks for the ministry of each of these churches, and trust in God's ongoing work in new ways.
- WDC hosted a Faith Formation Launch event June 12-13 with Katherine Goerzen as planning committee chair.
- Camino Nuevo (Dallas, TX) began as a new church plant, and Aposento Alto (Wichita, KS) and Camino de Santidad (Liberal, KS) continue. Grace Fellowship (Gladewater, TX), has closed due to the deaths and moves of members, after several years of fruitful ministry that impacted many lives with the good news of Christ.

As we move forward into the uncertainties and opportunities of a new year, let us remember that we are "held together in Christ," trusting in God's grace, and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Coming Events

November 25-27— Office closed for Thanksgiving

December 24— January 1, 2016: Office closed for Christmas & New Years

July 29-30, 2016—Annual Assembly, Bethel College, North Newton, KS



Heidi Regier Kreider installation at Annual Assembly.

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference
November/December 2015/January 2016



Delegates approve Rainbow Resolution

Story and photos by Laurie Oswald Robinson

NORTH NEWTON, Kan. – Western District Conference (WDC) delegates on Oct. 31 reached a long-discerned juncture: They voted 72 percent in favor of allowing pastors -- without fear of censure, if with congregational affirmation -- to officiate (or to refrain from officiating) marriage ceremonies for couples of any sexual orientation.

The vote was cast during the 2015 WDC annual assembly, "Held Together in Christ," at Bethel College. Prior to the vote, delegates spent time in prayer and worship, process review, table discussion, and open mic sharing before completing their ballots on the "Rainbow Resolution."

Rainbow Mennonite Church, Kansas City, first presented the resolution to WDC in July 2014. Following that presentation, WDC conducted a year and a half of discernment – including two WDC reference councils and counsel from Mennonite Church USA.

Of the delegates present, 185 voted yes, with 30 of those noting they oppose same-sex marriage. Of the

72 delegates who voted no, four of those noted affirmation for same-sex marriage. The resolution is as follows:

Be it resolved that the Western District Conference of the Mennonite Church USA, out of respect for the responsibility and commitment "to seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church," upholds the right of individual congregations to discern how homosexuality will be subject to Biblical interpretation, and

Be it further resolved that pastors, with the affirmation of their congregations, consistent with Mennonite polity, and without fear of censure, may

officiate or refuse to officiate ceremonies that consecrate before God monogamous, life-long unions, regardless of the sexual orientation of those being united.



Worshippers placed pieces of cloth on a cross, acknowledging their differing experiences in seeking to be faithful followers of Christ.

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

Western District Conference

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Heidi Regier Kreider, WDC conference minister, said she senses that delegates were ready to reach a decision and to move forward in the church's work.

"Now I hope that WDC congregations will continue to seek God's guidance through prayer, scripture study and dialogue as they bear witness to the good news of Jesus," she said. "I also hope WDC will find effective ways to equip congregational discernment and the understanding between congregations."



Table groups in prayer.

Reviewing the WDC story on discernment

Prior to the vote, delegates heard reports from members of WDC's Executive Board and the WDC Discernment Task. Wendy Funk Schrag, WDC secretary, reviewed the process leading up to the vote. Richard Gehring, WDC moderator, reviewed answers to frequently asked questions about the Rainbow resolution as well as two resolutions affirmed by Mennonite Church USA delegates this past July.

One of those resolutions calls for all members of Mennonite Church USA to forbear with each other as they seek different ways to be faithful to Christ on matters related to same-sex covenanted unions. The other resolution calls for the retention for four more years of the denomination's current guidelines regarding church membership and same-sex relationships/marriages alongside the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. The COF affirms marriage as a lifelong union between a man and a woman.

WDC will live out the implications of its delegate decision in accountability to Mennonite Church USA. Before delegates voted, Ervin Stutzman, executive director for Mennonite Church USA, and Gehring strove to clarify implications of a WDC "yes" vote.

Though not yet solidified, a major implication could include a conference-to-conference peer review, guided by the denomination's Constituency Leaders Council (CLC). Also, pastors who perform same-sex marriage ceremonies in WDC will have a note placed in their ministerial file. This would not be a censure; it

will describe the ministry perspective of the pastor whom other area conferences may call.

Delegates focus on WDC church planting and on counsel from Colossians 1

The focus of the afternoon delegate session shifted to other conference ministries, including a major new initiative by the WDC Church Planting Commission., reported by Marv Zehr, Chair.

"The commission is shaping a process that will help WDC to shift from the conference planting churches to churches planting churches with conference assistance," Zehr said.

To help delegates conform to Christ in their conference life together, Regier Kreider and Stutzman provided two sermons focused on Colossians 1:1-20 during evening worship sessions.

On Friday evening, Regier Kreider shared three characteristics of a thriving church: living in contrast to the prevailing society, caring for each other and the world and remaining Christ-centered. "We do not create unity or reconciliation, as important as conflict resolution is," she said. "We are not held together by our efforts but by Christ, the one by whom we are reconciled God and to one another."

Stutzman, in his sermon Saturday evening, focused on the implications of the cosmic vision of Christ's redemption of all creation. "Jesus is front and center of everything we do in the church," he said. "He has supremacy and is before all things and over all things and over all powers. Jesus [is] the center."



(L-R): Byron Pellecer, Antonio Caceros, Heidi Regier Kreider, Simon Tlumang, Kay Schroeder



Linda Ewert serves communion to Violeta Ajquejay.

Summer Food 4 Kids

by Norma Duerksen, Pastor, Trinity Mennonite Church, Hillsboro, KS

We thought we knew what we were doing. We would volunteer every day this summer to feed at-risk children ages 8-18 in our town. We would hand them their pre-packed sack lunch which contained a nutritionally balanced meal. We would give them a carton of milk which we had cooled in the refrigerator. We would hand them a swimming pass for the day and that would be it. We knew we would be doing something important, something this community really needed.



The "we" are the people of Trinity Mennonite Church in Hillsboro, KS. We are retired farmers. People in their 60's, 70's, and 80's. The women love to cook. The men love to help the church reach out to kids. So together we volunteered every noon hour of this past summer, Monday through Friday, for three months.



Little did we know how we would be taught a thing or two. Like the day the moms walked in. We had been serving children from ages 8-18 from families who qualified for free or reduced priced lunches at school. Now that school was out, they did not receive free breakfasts or lunches that the school usually provided. During summer time, food was scarce for these children. We were happy to help fill that need. But then the moms

started coming along with their children. We were reluctant to feed them the sack lunches because we had ordered a set number and didn't want to run out. We had ordered them for the children—not the moms. What were we to do? Turn them away? Then it dawned on us that hunger hits everybody in the family. Parents and children. Parents make better decisions about their children if they are nutritionally full. So we learned to welcome them and feed them. We even cooked extra hot meat dishes to supplement the meager sack lunches. The moms taught us a lot about the struggles of poverty. We learned to open our hearts a bit further.



We learned that Bible stories can reassure us. When a boy brought his meager lunch to Jesus, Jesus blessed it and broke it and there was enough. We, too, had enough. We had boxes of food left over. All were satisfied. There was no need to worry, or hoard, or deny food to anyone.

As volunteers we thought we would be loved and appreciated by these kids. They did all that! But we didn't expect to have grown so attached to them. We loved the way they teased and joked at the table. We loved how they respected the rules. We loved to watch them progress from being defiant to inviting. We loved holding the babies so their mothers could eat undisturbed. We expected to give a lot. We didn't expect to get so much back. Our summer days were filled with the life of a younger generation. We reveled in their energy. Now that school has started, we miss them.

Summer Food 4 Kids was made possible by a Loaves & Fishes Grant, using Vision 2012 funds, offered by the WDC Resource Commission.