

Comments from the Conference Minister

By Heidi Regier Kreider

Held Together in Mission has been WDC's theme for 2016. We have explored this theme in our annual assembly, and two reference council gatherings focused on being the church in rural and urban contexts. What have we been learning from these experiences? Here are three observations:

1. We have been enriched and enlightened through testimonies and stories shared by individuals from a wide range of perspectives: Church planters and pastors with life experience in places as far away as Myanmar (Burma) and Honduras, and as close as Houston, Austin, Dallas, Turpin, Topeka, Moundridge, and Beatrice; farm families modeling sustainable and generous living; business persons, advocates for peace and justice, food-bank volunteers, writers, musicians, and many more. These stories reflect an interweaving of personal vocation and congregational mission. They encourage us to be intentional in discovering how God uses our gifts, experiences and skills within our particular congregation and community. Marty Troyer's sermon at annual assembly and his new book *The Gospel Next Door* is a good resource to inspire us in this effort.

2. Our stereotypes have been challenged: For example, there is the assumption that cities are full of diversity and opportunity, and that rural communities are homogeneous and isolated. In fact, we have heard that both cities and rural communities are increasingly impacted by ethnic, religious and economic diversity; poverty exists in rural areas and small towns, even as it does in the city; in the midst of diversity, urban congregations may cluster around affiliation with others of similar culture and background; and electronic communications connect both urban and rural people to global realities beyond their local geography. Another example is the perception that traditional Anglo rural churches are facing inevitable decline, and that church planting and evangelism is only meant for other ethnic populations in the cities. In fact, there are many examples of creative mission and vital ministry within our rural churches, and some people are asking, "When will we have church plants among Anglo communities?" In both rural and urban contexts people are thinking about the lifespan of church communities, looking for the best ways to begin, sustain, and revitalize congregations – and how to know when it is time to plan for a healthy ending or transition to something new.

3. We have explored what it means to do "contextual theology," seeking to understand how God is working in different ways in our congregations and communities. At the same time, this prompts us to consider whether our structures and relationships reflect this understanding. Sometimes congregations in WDC may feel "on the margins" or distant from the so-called "center" of Mennonite heritage in Kansas. On the other hand, longtime, traditional Mennonite congregations may get the message that they are out of touch with the urban settings where "real" mission is happening. I hope that our year of being "Held Together in Mission" will move all of us toward deeper affirmation and awareness that God is present in all places, working here and now, wherever we are.

Coming Events

January 28-29, 2017
Know Jesus (Jr High youth)
Hesston College, KS

August 4-6, 2017
WDC Annual Assembly
Dallas, TX

Now on display in the Resource Library:

Worship resources for Advent and Christmas, Advent devotionals for families and adults, Christmas fiction for children and adults, and more. Stop by (or check our online catalog at mennowdc.org) and start preparing your heart and mind for the Advent/Christmas season! Or consider a resource to help you engage with God in the new year.

Celebrate Advent with your kids! Stop by the Conference Resource Library Makerspace to explore Advent with an Advent coloring poster and make a scratch-off paper ornament.

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference
December 2016 / January 2017



Festival de la Fraternidad Familiar (Family Fellowship Festival)

By Byron Pellecer, WDC Associate Conference Minister (Texas-based)

In an effort to join God's mission in the Dallas, Texas vicinity, WDC Hispanic Ministries invited Mennonite congregations and friends to participate and partner with *Festival de la Fraternidad Familiar* (Family Fellowship Festival) on September 24 at the Iglesia Menonita Luz del Evangelio, in Dallas.

The goals of this missional project were: 1) to build community together in a Mennonite perspective, and 2) to do outreach, connect and build relationships with the local community.

The spirit of the event was to gather the WDC churches for a time of fellowship and for local outreach. Live music, games, sports, food, and even an unexpected car show with about twenty vehicles and a four-wheeled motorcycle were part of the festival.



There was a lot of enthusiasm, team work and communal preparation for this event. Everyone felt this activity would build community with our Mennonite congregations and with "el barrio", their neighborhood.

"United as one body, we will be able to do great things in God's Kingdom", said Antonio Caceros, from Iglesia Menonita Camino Nuevo in Dallas.



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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The event surpassed everyone's expectation with over 200 participants. Included in the attendees were people from the community and non-church goers. They felt connected with the Christian body without pressure of any kind.

"We have to build bridges that are able to reflect and connect with our cultural diversity amid Western District Conference," said Sandra Montes-Martinez, from Iglesia Menonita Monte Horeb in Dallas.



God was glorified, the Church was strengthened, and the neighborhood was presented with Christ's gospel!



Monte Horeb and Southern Hills— A Sister Church Partnership Cemented by Christ's Love

Iglesia Menonita Monte Horeb (Dallas, TX) and Southern Hills Mennonite Church (Topeka, KS) have been Sister Churches for five years. Through language and cultural differences, this Sister Church relationship thrives. Larry Dixon, Southern Hills, affirmed, "The love of Christ brought us together and has been the glue that has cemented this sister church relationship." Through hand-written letters and poetry, as well as texts and emails, the two congregations keep communication open. They enjoy face-to-face visits at delegate Assemblies and on the weekend of the recent Reference Council in Dallas.



(L-R): Antonio Caceros, previous pastor of Monte Horeb, now working on a new church plant, Camino Nuevo, in Dallas; Sandra Montes-Martinez, current interim pastor of Monte Horeb; Roger Neufeld Smith, pastor of Southern Hills Mennonite Church. These three leaders have been responsible for nurturing the sister church relationships among their parishioners, especially by speaking to each others' congregants for worship.



Eating together (communion) has been an important way for the congregations to break down barriers of language and culture and build friendships. WDC Associate Conference Minister (Kansas-based) Kathy Neufeld Dunn (left) joined the worship service to bring greetings after the Reference Council.



Members of Monte Horeb hosted visiting members of Southern Hills after the WDC Reference Council held in October in Dallas for worship and a meal together.

WHAT DOES "URBAN" MEAN?

Over 50 participants from around WDC gathered October 22 at Iglesia Menonita Luz del Evangelio in Dallas, TX, to worship, do Bible study, and share stories and conversation about what it means to be the church in an urban context. This was the second of two Reference Council gatherings exploring WDC's 2016 theme, *Held Together in Mission*. (An earlier gathering in Beatrice, NE, in April focused on being the church in the rural context.)



Lois Barrett, Professor of Theology and Anabaptist Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and member of Mennonite Church of the Servant (Wichita, KS) gave theological reflections. She noted scriptural references to cities such as Jeremiah's call to Jewish exiles in Babylon to "seek the welfare/shalom of the city where I have sent you" and Paul's letters to Christian churches in cities such as Rome, with a population of a million people. Within the city, the church has to figure out how to navigate issues raised by ethnic, social and religious diversity. Lois highlighted Romans 14:1 – 15:13, as one model of the church doing theology within a diverse community.



Roger Neufeld Smith, Doug Penner, Janet and Larry Dixon, and Guy Smoker from Southern Hills Mennonite Church (Topeka, KS) told about cultivating connections in their neighborhood and advocating together with other churches for justice and peace concerns. Damian Rodriguez told his story of immigration from Honduras to becoming pastor at Iglesia



Menonita Comunidad de Esperanza (Dallas, TX), which hosts a community child-care center. Pastor Simon Tlumang from Chin Emmanuel Church (Houston, TX) shared the challenges of being a pastor for an immigrant community from Myanmar (Burma) in the largest city in Texas. Lee Lever, pastor at Austin (TX) Mennonite Church, introduced Brisa Peacock and Omar Salavarría, who reflected on cross-cultural experiences as young adults in an urban church.



Participants embraced the challenge and joy of conversation across language and cultural differences, and appreciated the delicious food and warm hospitality generously provided by Pastor Juan Limones and members of Luz del Evangelio. Together, we got a glimpse and a taste of the "New Jerusalem," God's holy city of shalom!

- Heidi Regier Kreider, WDC Conference Minister