

Comments from the Conference Minister

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Rooted and Built Up in Christ is the theme selected by the WDC Executive Board for 2017, WDC's 125th anniversary year. The theme is based on Colossians 2:6-7: "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."

The word "therefore" in these verses suggests that we should check what precedes them: Earlier in his letter, the apostle Paul writes, "In our prayers for you we always thank God... for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. 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. ...For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 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." (Colossians 1:3-6, 9-10)

The fruits of love, hope, truth, wisdom, good work and knowledge are possible only when our lives are rooted in Christ and growing. Roots bring nourishment and water to the plant. Roots are like the foundations of a building, firmly established to give stability and strength to the structure above the ground.

As we consider the 125th anniversary of WDC, roots and foundations represent our history and what we have been taught. They symbolize what we have received from those who have preceded us, those whose legacy and contributions have helped WDC become what it is today. At the same time, we are "rooted" not merely for our own preservation but to be fruitful and "built up in Christ." We are established in the faith in order to share the good news of God's grace with others and join God's work of healing and hope in the world. Bearing fruit is a sign of health and vitality, and assures continuity of life. As we consider the 125th anniversary of WDC, fruitfulness and being "built up in Christ" represent our future in the years to come.

Recently, WDC staff members explored these themes in an annual staff retreat at Camp MennoScah, through conversation and some playful hands-on activities: rooting plants in pots of soil, building structures out of Duplo blocks, and coloring drawings of roots, plants, and buildings. We shared stories of our personal "roots" - experiences which have shaped us and people from whom we have received faith. Then, we considered what roots have shaped WDC, and how God is building us up to bear fruit in the future.



WDC's 125th anniversary is a time to share stories of roots and fruit, to tell how God has established the foundations of our past and is building us up for faithful work in the future. The WDC Executive Board is planning ways to celebrate this at WDC annual assembly in August and in the months that follow.

Coming Events

February 19, 7 pm "What's So Funny About Money", (Ted & Co. show), McPherson (KS) Opera House

March 23 Women's Spring Supper Bethel College, North Newton, KS

April 29 Congregational Resourcing Event: Congregational Implications and Response to Sexual Abuse Outside the Church First Mennonite Church, Hutchinson, KS

August 4-6 WDC Annual Assembly Doubletree by Hilton Hotel Arlington, DFW South, TX

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference February/March 2017



San Antonio: Continuing the Song of Hope

Singing God's Song of Hope—In early December 2016, the people of San Antonio Mennonite Church (SAMC) were witnesses to hope. They heard the stories of some of the 500 asylum-seeking moms who



risked everything to get themselves and their children to safety and a better life. In the four days that a local Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Center released a flood of traumatized mothers and children and the media flooded in, SAMC had the opportunity to witness to God's faithfulness as they offered short-term housing in every corner of their church building for these refugees. They had the chance to "sing God's song of hope" in public witness as few churches have.

A Strange and Wonderful Song that Christmas—Why did so many women and children end up crowded into this church? The ICE Detention Center in the area lost their court battle to become a legal "child care center" where children were housed with potentially dangerous adults not related to them. So, in less than a week, around 500 women and children seeking asylum



from violence in their home countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras were released, whether or not

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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they had anywhere to go from there. Members of SAMC had been working quietly with others for eighteen months to see that the regular stream of asylum seekers routinely released from detention in San Antonio had a safe place for a day or two until they could travel to be with family in the U.S. The Interfaith Welcome Committee had been ministering to 500 people a month, not 500 people in less than a week. Church members and other volunteers quickly saw the desperate need for sleeping space, so Christmas decorations were removed “to make room for a living nativity,” according to San Antonio Mennonite Church pastor John Garland. After hours of finding more space for more people who were released in the middle of the night, an exhausted Garland sat in his office that overlooked the sanctuary trying to find peace at 4 a.m. as hundreds of mothers and children below were finally settling down somewhat. He covered his ears to block out the reality, and to rest. Then he heard a woman singing a lullaby, not quietly, either. It was a lullaby for many mothers and children, and it was a song of hope.



A Song of Comic Dissonance—God was at work not just in the church building. God was and is clearly working in the hearts and minds of neighbors nearby. SAMC sits in a neighborhood known for people who “don’t do institutional church.” Yet, as the days went on, the church became packed with neighborhood volunteers. Several remarked on the comedy of this. They had not been in a church for so long, yet here they were willingly. They didn’t realize Christians cared about this sort of thing, yet here they were working together with Christ’s followers engaged in work they all cared about. God was at work breaking down preconceived notions about who Christians are and what they do and don’t do. Garland notes, “God

doesn’t seem to care so much about our beliefs, but about how we’re acting them out in our neighborhoods.”

A Song of Solidarity—“It was a strange time for those four days with the crazy influx of people,” says Garland. “There were crazy amounts of media coverage with reporters crying and thanking us. The Church was getting all this popular publicity. Then it hit us, we’ve gotten the publicity, but we realize the real heroes, the real witnesses to hope, are the women who risk everything. We’re honored to touch God’s story in these families. We stand with them for a few days cheering them on.”

A Song of Pain and Injustice—The strange situation at SAMC in early December highlighted by the media is just a tiny piece of a much bigger, harder-to-solve puzzle. It includes the challenges of the violence in the asylum seekers’ home countries, the terrifying drug cartels, then the danger of being caught up in human trafficking when they make it across our borders and out of detention. Garland mused about these terrible complexities: “People who make it from their home countries to northern Mexico are stuck between a rock and a hard place—getting turned away at the U.S. border, and ending up in very dangerous areas. They end up in churches in areas [of Mexico] controlled by the drug cartels. Some of these churches have been reaching out to Mennonite Central Committee. But then the question becomes how to help and not hurt unintentionally? How do you financially support churches, when you’re afraid that doing so will put the church leaders at risk of kidnapping and extortion?” These are painful questions that hang in the air.

A Song of Praise—Even with the forces of evil doing “nasty things” that could easily overwhelm some of us, John Garland finds reasons to praise God. “Thanks to God for the work God is doing and thanks for the witness of the heroes of faith we’re seeing coming through our city.” The work continues. The witness continues. The song goes on. “We need to continue to sing that song of hope that God is doing amazing things out of nothing—bringing love, hope and caretaking.” Thanks be to God!

—Kathy Neufeld Dunn, WDC Associate Conference Minister (Kansas-Based) interview with John Garland, Pastor, San Antonio Mennonite Church

What’s So Funny and Not So Funny About Money?

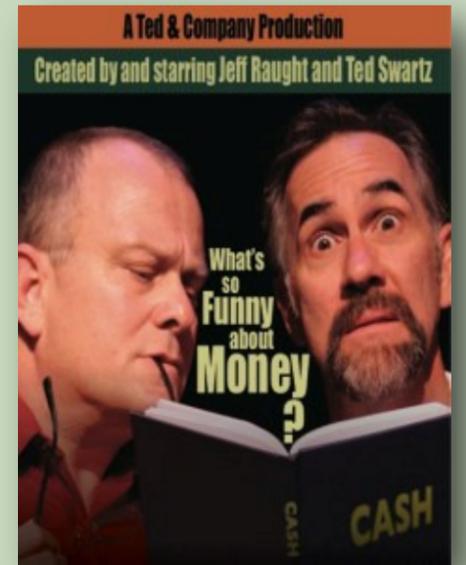
How do we spend our money? Why is it so hard to talk about our finances? How does our faith fit in to fiscal affairs? Is the banjo really necessary for the show? These are big questions, best asked with humor.

Get a new perspective on your relationship with God and money during the Ted & Company TheaterWorks show *What’s So Funny About Money?* at the McPherson Opera House Sunday, February 19, 7 pm. This humorous, thought-provoking show explores our discomfort with talking about money, the financial pressures we face, our use of time, and even corn dogs. See a clip of the show at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEw5FLfO4Pw.

This show is open to the public. Your generous donation at the door will assist WDC pastors with serious financial need to get out of debt through the WDC Matching Fund. According to Mitch Stutzman, Everence Stewardship Consultant, a survey of Mennonite pastors found:

- Many pastors carry significant student debt from both college and seminary studies.
- Many older pastors have debt related to health care.
- Many pastors have insufficient retirement savings.
- A large number of pastors are bi-vocational which brings its own level of financial complexity.
- Many pastors struggle to make sense of financial matters such as clergy tax preparation, financial planning, and appropriate investments.

What’s So Funny About Money? is sponsored by Western District Conference, Mennonite Church USA and generously underwritten by Everence Financial.



Reflections on Women's Conference



I’ve Got the Power! Naming and Reclaiming our Power as a Force for Good was the focus at the Women in Leadership Project conference in Leesburg, VA November 4-6, 2016. Violeta Ajquejay and Berni Kaufman (pictured left) were among the Western District women to attend.

Kaufman shared with the group that she had received a mug from a male pastor in the mid 1980’s that said, *A woman has to work twice as hard as a man to get half as far.* A young pastor, in her first pastorate, reacted, “Did you smash that mug?” she said as she gestured throwing the mug to the ground. “No,” Kaufman replied. “I’ve kept it.” To Kaufman, it was an expression of acknowledgement, albeit with humor. The reaction of the young pastor was perhaps an expression of, “Get it already! It’s no longer funny.” An example of the diversity represented at the conference.

Table groups reflected on questions such as: “Describe the life you would have if you reclaimed/embraced/owned your power,

rather than feared it.” “What roles, positions and/or privileges in society give you power? How can you use this power in constructive ways?” “Imagine God’s power enabling you to empower others!”

Calenthia Dowdy, professor at Eastern University, Philadelphia, PA, focused on Mark 5:21-43. “We live in social structures where we are not the same. Where we don’t matter the same. Where we aren’t treated the same. For some reason we get in these environments with women and we tend to think we’re all the same, and we’re not.” Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Lancaster, PA, university professor and former moderator of Mennonite Church USA challenged the audience to reject society’s push to compete, to pit ourselves against each other. Mennonite women need to create safe, holy spaces for one another by refusing the script we have been given and choose a new narrative.

Kaufman and Ajquejay were blessed and empowered by the conference, and express special thanks to the Western District Resource Commission and Western District Women in Mission for funding the trip.

—Submitted by Violeta Ajquejay and Berni Kaufman