

Comments from the Conference Minister

Heidi Regier Kreider



Over thirty WDC leaders met for Reference Council on Saturday, October 28 in Kansas. In contrast to reference council gatherings in recent years (with broader representation to discuss certain themes or issues) this reference council featured the elected leadership groups of WDC: Executive Board, Gifts Discernment Committee, four commissions (Church Planting, Ministerial Leadership, Resource, and Stewardship) - and staff. We gathered to build relationships, equip and collaborate for ministry; and plan for the year to come in light of WDC's mission.

The group size allowed us to meet at the WDC offices in North Newton, KS, with plenary sessions in the large conference room and break-out meetings in the Resource Library and other conference rooms. To me, it felt like riding in a bus full of people for six hours - a little crowded, but a great way to get acquainted and create common experience. I was glad to get exercise and fresh air, when we were sent in small groups on a scavenger hunt around and outside the WDC facility, resulting in much commotion and laughter!

In the opening session, moderator Anita Kehr presented themes from delegate conversations at WDC's recent annual assembly, grouped according to the mission statement, "WDC empowers Anabaptist/Mennonite congregations to Witness and invite others to faith in Jesus Christ, Dwell in just and loving relationships, and Connect to God's mission in the world:

- **Witness:** We hear a call to focus more on scripture study (not only in times of disagreement, but to deepen faith and strengthen fellowship), worship together in many styles; and share the Gospel through church planting, nurturing youth and young adults, and sharing faith with neighbors.
- **Dwell:** We hear a call to build bridges and strengthen relationships across generational, geographical, theological, cultural, ethnic and economic differences within WDC. We want to engage young people, move beyond a "Newton-centric" way of operating, and embrace our multi-ethnic identity and varied histories.
- **Connect:** We hear a call to renew our commitment to peace and social justice through action and advocacy, in areas such as prison reform and abolishing the death penalty, responding to immigrants and refugees, working for justice in Palestine/Israel, and creation care.

Following Anita's presentation, I shared some principles from the Kansas Leadership Center. The gap between our aspirations for WDC and the current realities we face presents adaptive challenges, which cannot be quickly "fixed." To address those challenges, we must learn, grow and change; work together with many different people, experiment, explore, and practice patience and curiosity. To fulfill our mission, we must also reach out and work together across factions - different groups of people who each hold unique viewpoints based on their values, beliefs, loyalties, perceived risks and losses, and life experiences.

In break-out sessions, each commission/committee then considered how these priorities and leadership principles relate to their work. The concluding session provided opportunity for groups to report on their discussions, share questions and observations with each other, and consider how the Holy Spirit is moving through these conversations. I am grateful for all the gifted leaders who shape WDC, trusting God to guide us on our continuing journey together.

 **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

Coming Events

January 19-20, 2018
Year of Evangelism Kickoff:
Anabaptist Witness
Alexanderwohl Mennonite
Church, Goessel, KS

July 27-28
WDC Annual Assembly
Tabor Mennonite Church,
Newton, KS & Eden
Mennonite Church,
Moundridge, KS

July 29
WDC Annual Assembly
Sunday worship option
Alexanderwohl Mennonite
Church, Goessel, KS

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference
December 2017 / January / February 2018



Year of Evangelism: Anabaptist Witness!

By Kathy Neufeld Dunn, WDC Associate Conference Minister (Kansas-Based)

WDC Resource Commission has declared 2018 the **Year of Evangelism!** There will be large-group workshops and smaller initiatives throughout the year. Goals for these events are:

- Encourage congregations to grow in willingness and capacity to share the good news of God's kingdom breaking into the world through Jesus.
- Equip congregations and individuals with practical tools for sharing the gospel.
- Reclaim an authentic Anabaptist-Mennonite vocabulary and practice of evangelism.
- Renew our reliance on prayer as the energizing force for evangelism.

From Canadian pastor-author Bruxy Cavey to James Krabill (Mennonite Mission Network) to the late missiologist Alan Kreider to our own WDC missional author and pastor, Brad Roth, diverse Anabaptist voices have been writing and talking

about realigning mission and peace. They ask, how do we link good news and good works together today in a way that's authentically Anabaptist?

Alan Kreider told a story in his article, "Tongue Screws and Testimony," in *Missio Dei*, about a Mennonite seminarian's reticence to talk about her faith. "I know that how we live is important," she said, "but I think talking's important, too. Last year I...went to Fort Benning, to the School of the Americas, to protest the way the U.S. Army was training Latin American soldiers to suppress political opposition. Before we left home, the leader carefully prepared us. He gave us a list of questions that people would likely ask us. So we worked together to prepare good answers and then we tried them out on each other...It was really helpful. But, we've never done anything like this about Christianity."

Year of Evangelism will offer chances for you to practice your testimony—sharing your authentic story of God's work in your life—with some brothers and sisters who will be cheering you on.

The Year of Evangelism Kick-Off will be January 19-20 at Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, Goessel, KS. A unique feature will be the Creative Strategizing Jam. What can we learn from each other as we “jam” together? Two Outreach teams from two separate congregations will meet at a time with a gifted missional coach. One team and the coach will listen in and offer counsel to the other group as they exchange missional ideas, then teams will trade roles: churches supporting churches, or jamming, as they share their unique missional visions for their contexts.

At the Kick Off, worshippers will engage in ancient spiritual practices to the tune of upbeat bluegrass music.

There are other events still in the planning stage—seeing our rural contexts through missional eyes, and reaching out to our neighbors in urban neighborhoods. A storytelling and testimony event will be in the fall of 2018.

Please check out details for the January 19-20 Kick Off event at <http://mennowdc.org/year-of-evangelism/>. You’ll find a schedule for the first two-day event, a poster, information about speakers and seminars, and a registration form. Stay tuned for more Year of Evangelism events throughout the coming year. It’s about Anabaptist witness to the good news of Jesus. Let’s get talking—to each other and our neighbors!

Hurricane Harvey, the aftermath and recovery

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

During my first visit to Houston, TX after Hurricane Harvey, I noticed that the city and our four Western District Conference churches were facing hardship in different ways and yet the words of Jeremiah are reflected in their ministries: *“And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile, pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7 NLT).*

The effects of Hurricane Harvey continue to be a painful experience for our brothers, sisters, friends and the whole Houston population. There has been a lot of suffering and devastation. Despite pain, destruction and anguish there are also stories of hope and healing. The Houston Mennonite community of faith continues discerning the best way to respond in the aftermath of the storm. They have used air mattresses to evacuate families trapped by flood waters. They have made their way through the debris to reach families in need and provide them with food, cleaning supplies, construction materials, moral and spiritual support. They have worked tirelessly alongside other partners to raise funds to assist undocumented families who do not qualify for federal assistance.

WDC also invited contributions to support WDC’s congregations in Houston. Thanks to many generous donations, over \$20,000 has been received and distributed directly to these congregations. As they have received financial support they are helping their members and other local congregations in whatever ways possible. They have assisted not only their own parishioners but the wider community as well. For example, at least sixteen independent congregations reached out to our Mennonite churches seeking assistance. These local congregations were also impacted by the Christian love, grace and generosity demonstrated by the Mennonite family.

Alongside Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Church USA, individuals, and other local and national organizations, WDC will continue exploring ways to support our Houston pastors and congregations as they continue ministering to the city and responding in the aftermath in the best way possible. Your prayers and support are very much appreciated as our congregations join God at work in the reconstruction and wellbeing of the city of Houston.



Conviction of Things Unseen

By Michael Unruh, Camp Mennoscah, Executive Director

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” – Heb. 11:1

About 92 years ago a group of people from central Kansas saw an importance for youth to gather together. In 1925, they began hosting a youth retreat at one of the local colleges. The retreat moved in 1937 to a camp about an hour away. Despite a healthy number of 200 attendees, the group had a larger vision. Because they saw camping as a key part of Christian formation, a yearly one-week retreat was simply not enough! But, renting facilities for more than one week was not financially feasible. What would be done?

In 1947 the retreat committee began looking for locations to start its own camp. One location looked promising but the soil would not hold water for a pond or lake, which was seen as “essential” for youth retreats. Another provided existing facilities. However, the committee wasn’t convinced that a man-made facility would provide the proper opportunities to experience God as Creator. So, they kept looking. Would a suitable place be found?

Then, because of one man’s persuasiveness, the committee revisited a piece of land. There wasn’t a lake on this property, but a *river*. One committee member said, “It’s only a river embedded in weeds!” “This doesn’t look like God’s country to me,” remarked another. Nonetheless, in 1948 the land was purchased. But what would it become?

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” Hebrews 11:1 reads. In



1949 the first retreat was held on the newly purchased ground. Farm trucks and tents were used for lodging, and canvas was strung up between trees as a roof over the eating area. Playing in the river was central to the camping experience.

On May 14, 1950, the place was given a name: *Camp Mennoscah*. A vision that began in 1925 was taking form. A “conviction of things not seen” led to starting a one-week retreat, then buying land, and bringing tents. Today at Camp Mennoscah we host eight sessions of summer youth camps. We have cabins, a dining hall, a pool, a retreat center, and electricity in most buildings.

Though camp has undergone changes in the last half-century-plus, one aspect has remained constant: Camp Mennoscah has been a place to experience God in nature and Christian community. In the early years the goal was for youth to grow in Christian faith and values in an unpresured, loving environment, where campers could meet God on their own faith journeys. Today this same goal holds true! Campers and staff meet God through creation and through loving relationships with one another. Camp is a place where Christian faith and values are lived out in an authentic community.



Camp staff (Deborah, Gardell, Olivia, and I) is excited about our small roles in continuing this vision. Yet we know that we have never been alone in this effort. Camp Mennoscah is blessed to have a rich history and encouraging future because of volunteers, retreat attendees, churches, board members, and donors. And you!

WDC Task Forces

At the recent WDC annual assembly, delegates shared their passion for peace and justice, and a concern that WDC's current organizational structure does not include a "Peace and Justice" commission. The hope is that the Executive Board and all of WDC's Commissions will keep this concern central to their work.

WDC's by-laws also provide for Task Forces, which may be created in response to special needs or interests. Task forces are a way for WDC members to join efforts and put their passions and concerns into action. Currently five Task Forces are active in WDC: *End Death Penalty*, *Low German Mennonites from Mexico Support Committee*, *Trustees*, and two recently created task forces on *Israel-Palestine Relations* and *Immigration*. Task forces are created through application to a commission or the Executive Board, with final approval by Executive Board, and accountability to a commission or the Executive Board. Task forces expire after three years unless renewed by the Executive Board.

For more information on current task forces or to get an application form, see: <http://mennowdc.org/committees-task-forces/> or contact WDC at 316-283-6300.