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Defending peace, defending the climate:  
Anabaptist organizations collaborate on climate change

Leadership from 18 Anabaptist organizations in the United States and Canada convened at the Anabaptist Collaboration on Climate Change (ACCC) on Jan. 26 and 27 to address what many consider a moral emergency.

Those gathered drafted a statement that was later signed by the majority of the participating organizations: “As organizations founded on Christian faith in the Anabaptist tradition, we recognize the significant threat to global communities, economic justice, and the next generations from climate change. We are committed to explore our work and mission in support of sustainable and just climate solutions.”

The 24-hour meeting at the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Welcoming Place in Akron, Pennsylvania, was the largest gathering of Anabaptist leaders on climate change in North America to date. It was organized by the Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions (CSCS).

“Having so many organizations willing to come together and talk about climate change clearly reflects that this issue is important to Anabaptist communities,” said Doug Graber Neufeld, the director of CSCS.

Since its founding five years ago, CSCS has functioned as a joint initiative between three core partners: Eastern Mennonite University, Mennonite Central Committee and Goshen College. In order to broaden its reach, CSCS is in the process of deepening its relationships with a wider range of partners in programming, governance and financial support.

The event was meant to provide a place for a focused conversation on the Anabaptist response to climate change as well as lay groundwork for future collaborations between the organizations.

“There is a real risk that climate change will have a huge impact on things Mennonites care about,” Ray Martin, who helped found CSCS, said in an opening speech. “Well-being of families, conflict, sustainability of agriculture, hunger, our sense of community, our health, the livability of low-lying areas, even our faith (will be affected).”

Martin went on to say he believes Anabaptists are uniquely positioned for climate action.

Anabaptists have a history of radical innovation, a theology centered around community and care for creation, a background in agriculture and land stewardship and a value placed on simple, selfless living. These are attributes that “may make us more open to acknowledging the concerns of global warming and more willing to change our ways to address the risks,” he said.

Jennifer Halteman Schrock, director of Mennonite Creation Care Network which works closely with CSCS on congregational outreach, appreciated the questions posed at the gathering. “How might we leverage our unique identity in practical ways? What assets do our organizations have that we could mobilize? What could we do together? It will take time for answers to emerge, but I believe they are the right ones to ask,” she said.

Sarah Augustine, a participant who represented the Coalition for Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery, was inspired by the willingness of the participants to “come together and speak with” one voice” despite the group’s diversity.

Still, there were many voices not present at the table.

“We represent the people who are causing the problem more than people who are affected by it,” said Graber Neufeld. “We are very aware of that.”

To Augustine, the role of the Coalition at the gathering was to represent those on the front lines of climate change and remind others that climate change isn’t an abstract concept; there are people suffering right now.

“Indigenous people and vulnerable people... are usually the first people that are impacted; they’re the first that are going to be refugees, the first that are displaced, the first people injured by climate change,” she said. “It’s good to see Mennonite institutions willing to take a stand.”

Brent Alderfer of Community Energy, Inc., extended this moral concern to future generations, “Solutions take more than a tweak to operations—they require revamping our core missions to assure sustainability for generations to come.”

At the ACCC, participants were asked the question, ‘how can CSCS best support Anabaptist organizations in their climate efforts?’

"With climate change accelerating, it is clear that individual organizations will find it more and more difficult to make a difference," said Mark Lancaster, Advancement Director for CSCS. "There is a growing need for building collaborations among Anabaptist organizations to create broader impact, and CSCS would like to embrace this role to coordinate work and catalyze actions."

The center plans to organize more gatherings on climate change in the future, and include a broader range of participants.

In the meantime, CSCS facilitators encouraged participants to consider how Anabaptist organizations working in diverse areas can incorporate climate justice into their operations and missions.

For Mennonite Men, this looks like developing the JoinTrees campaign with the goal of planting a million trees by 2030.

For Goshen College climate action looks like developing young leaders and conducting research that will inform the sustainability work of others.

For the Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship, it means exploring the ethics and impact of climate change to human health, while for MennoMedia, it looks like incorporating Anabaptist perspectives of climate issues into the publications that reach beyond Anabaptist audiences.

The gathering left many participants with new questions, but also with newfound hope.

“Having the Mennonite church step forward as a tradition and say ‘on behalf of peace we have to defend the climate... defend the earth.’ That brings me hope,” said Augustine.

Graber Neufeld concluded his presentation with a reminder: when it comes to climate action, the outcome is what’s most important.

“In everything, we are not interested in doing things just for the sake of doing things, but because it makes a difference...” he said. “(The) ultimate outcome for us would be climate justice.”

Organizations that participated in the meeting were CSCS (as the convening organization), Coalition for Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery, Eastern Mennonite University, Everence Financial, Goshen College, MCC U.S., MCC Canada, MennoMedia, Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Creation Care Network, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship, Mennonite Men, Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite World Conference, and Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center of Goshen College.

A link to the consensus statement and signatories is found at the CSCS website for the meeting: <https://sustainableclimatesolutions.org/anabaptist-climate-collaboration/>

