



**Central
District
Conference**
A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

Reporter

**KNOWING
CHRIST'S LOVE
– ANSWERING
GOD'S CALL**

July 2013

God calls us to be living stones

CDC's 57th annual meeting June 20-22



Delegate table conversation at Bluffton University

Delegates took home the phrase: “God calls us to be living stones” from the 57th annual Central District Conference meeting held June 20-22 at Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio.

With the conference theme “God’s Story...Our Stories,” delegates carried on conference business, worshipped in three settings, met members of a potential CDC congregation, participated in workshops on a variety of topics, and became involved in a plenary session “Undoing Racism and Advancing Intercultural Transformation.”

A worship altar covered with stones brought from each congregation tied into the conference theme.

Delegates met with two members of Covenant Mennonite Fellowship, Sarasota, Fla. The congregation is being considered for CDC membership in 2014. Delegates approved a 2013-14 spending plan totaling \$215,294, and a new slate of officers. Joyce Schumacher, Grace, completed her two-year term as conference president at the conclusion of the conference. Ron Guengerich, Silverwood, assumed her position and Lisa Weaver, Madison, is now president-elect.

Behind a worship altar covered with stones brought from each of the partici-

pating conference congregations, Patty Shelly, Bethel College, Kansas, Bible professor and moderator-elect for Mennonite Church USA, preached three sermons. Those messages, based on Joshua 4:1-9, John 8:1-11 and 1 Peter 2:4-10, reinforced the conference’s stone theme.

The three texts involved stones with various symbolic meanings: gathering stones, throwing stones and becoming living stones. In each sermon, Shelly asked worshippers to ponder the question: “What do these stones mean?” Using these symbols, Shelly even referred – humorously – to the texts as “giving her the opportunity to work with sermons that rock.”

Stating that the Bible is full of stories where stones acknowledge God’s presence, Shelly’s opening night sermon from Joshua reminded delegates that stones are a sign for all of the people of the earth that God is a mighty God.

“My intention is to suggest a connection of the biblical story and our own story of a community of faith,” she said, telling about Joshua’s instructions to create a stone monument to the people of Israel.

She said that in Joshua, the story looks back and ripples forward with the altar of stones on the bank of the Jordan River. “God’s grace doesn’t stop with Joshua. Another Joshua comes to the banks of the Jordan 1,200 years later,” she said. “Jesus also pondered these stones.”

Shelly suggested that Joshua’s altar stands for the idea that all the people of the earth may know that God does marvelous things.

On Friday evening, she preached on John’s story of the Pharisees bringing a woman, who

God calls us to be living stones

had sinned, to Jesus. The Pharisees asked Jesus if she should be stoned.

Calling it a story of grace from the margins of scripture, Shelly said this is a conflict story posing the question how to interpret scripture.

“Jesus challenges us to extend mercy,” said Shelly about the story. Adding that when Jesus kneels to the ground to write in the dirt it reminds us of the servant pose of Jesus. “This story leaves us aware of our own rush to judgment.”

“John 8 calls us to scatter stones in the ocean of God’s mercy and compassion,” said Shelly. “In this story we are invited to participate in the extravagant grace of God. Let our stones of judgment and hostility dissolve in God’s grace.”

On Saturday morning, Shelly, preaching on 1 Peter 2, said that this text brings us to the largest text of stones in the New Testament.

“The story is about our invitation to get a piece of the Rock,” she said, “We are the recipients of God’s mercy worthy of an explanation point.”

Explaining that the letter in Peter is actu-

ally a word of encouragement to a scattered people, it is a vision of living stones. “This is a call we need to answer again and again. Keep on coming to Jesus and become a living stone built into a spiritual household,” she said.

In reference to being a follower of Jesus, the people receiving Peter’s letter were connected through suffering, rejection and trials. “This is the language of the upside-down kingdom,” said Shelly.

During a response time at Friday evening’s service, Dianne Schmidt, worship leader, asked worshippers to reflect on times when they had stony hearts like the story from the sermon, or hard-hearted attitudes.

Congregational stories

Columbus, Hively Avenue, Community and Assembly shared stories with delegates.

Phil Hart, Columbus, told about the congregation’s annual summer rummage sale that supports Christian Peacemaker Teams. “We wanted to be serious, to be a witness about peace around the world.”

And so, a sale started by three CPTers in the congregation grew into an event that helps fund CPT trips. Proceeds from the original sale realized around \$2,000. Today the event raises \$4,000 for the trips.

“When I return to Columbus following this conference our congregation’s full scale rummage sale will be in process,” said Hart. Comparing rummage sale items to CPTers, Hart said the items being sold are things that get in the way of their owners, just like the CPT motto: “Getting In The Way.”

A second story involved two CDC congregations. Members from Hively traveled to Markham, where, using the theme, ‘Walk a Mile In My Shoes,’ the congregations created a daylong event getting to know each other.

“It was a time that gave people an opportunity to talk about tough issues,” said Charles Geiser of Hively. “We talked and listened to each other. We divided into small groups and held a prayer walk in Markham, where we walked to a school, a library, abandoned houses and even prayed for a police officer.”

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Undoing racism: *Plenary session*

Lead by Cyneatha Millsaps and Lynda Nyce, delegates focused on undoing racism and advancing intercultural transformation. Following the session, several delegates continued the discussion in a workshop.

Millsaps asked delegates to think about how their ideas on race were formed and shaped.

Lynda Nyce: “What would it mean for your congregation to have these conversations?”

Using a worksheet “My Personal Journey to Understanding, Appreciating and Celebrating Ethnic Diversity,” delegates focused on nine discussion points. Delegates discussed them in small groups and then shared

with the larger audience.

Discussion points centered on:

- When were you first aware of people unlike yourself, in race or ways of life?
- What were your feelings about those unlike yourself?

- Can you recall how your parents expressed their feelings about race?
- Was race talked about openly in your family, or was it mentioned only in off-hand remarks, jokes and stereotypes?

Some of the comments given by delegates follow:

- “We were told to lock our car doors when we traveled through poor parts of town.”
- “These things were never said, but my parents weren’t aware of white privilege.”
- “I’m a Palestine Arab – Israelis and Jews were our enemies.”
- “We didn’t know how much discrimination was going on in the North.”
- “I grew up in Goshen and didn’t know it was a ‘sundown’ town.”

Following the sharing, Nyce urged delegates to take the discussion to their congregations. “What would it mean for your congregation to have these conversations?” she asked.



Charles Geiser and Cyneatha Millsaps share their congregational stories with delegates

“We made good friends that day and for that we are thankful,” said Geiser.

“We dealt with issues of race and identity,” said Cyneatha Millsaps, of Community. “We talked about how we grew up and how our ideas were formed. Unexpected things happened that day. We have a lot in common in Christ.”

Telling Assembly’s story, Karl Shelly said, “In order to keep our peace witness alive, we at Assembly felt we had to be proactive and intentionally overcome our isolation from the reality of war.”

“Our congregation adopted the congregational peace pledge, which commits us each year to help fund a member willing to travel on an educational delegation to a conflict zone,” he said.

He added that Christian Peacemaker Teams, Witness For Peace, Mennonite Central Committee and others regularly have such delegations. Also, once a year, Assembly sponsors an event that asks youth to question participation in war. The congregation brings in at least one speaker a year who has worked with peace building or situations of war.

“We sponsored two people from our congregation to go on delegations to Colombia. We’ve engaged our youth in peace curriculum, and this Sunday we’ll hear from MCC workers who are serving in Afghanistan,” said Shelly.

Dreams for Our World quilt

Tied to the plenary session was a discussion on the “Dreams for Our World” quilt, a twin quilt made by Bonnie Neufeld, inspired and designed with the

help of the Kids’ Club of Community, Markham. The quilt was originally auctioned in 2007. Purchased by Mim Shirk, it was donated to CDC and sold in 2008 at a silent auction. Steve and Susan Ortman Goering purchased it and in 2011 donated it again to CDC.

CDC’s Stewardship Committee shared the story behind the “Dreams for Our World

Fund.” The committee has discussed options to use the quilt as a fundraiser for CDC a second time.

Dean Heisey explained his vision for the quilt: “It would be able to travel, to be on display in churches as they engage in anti-racism and multicultural awareness activities.”

“The quilt can be a conversation starter,” said Heisey. “Let’s pass it around our congregations.”

“Donations will be made to CDC and used to provide assistance to congregations or individuals participating in a variety of activities, such as congregational narrative, Intercultural Development Inventory and follow up and Damascus Road training. More information will be coming on this project.

Covenant Fellowship

In a get-acquainted session, delegates met two members of Covenant Mennonite Fellowship, Sarasota, Fla., Debra Gingerich and Ann Krehbiel. The conference will vote on whether to accept Covenant into CDC membership in 2014.

The two shared stories of Covenant’s mission. The Fellowship was established in 2000 and was a member of Southeast Conference until 2011. Since that time Covenant operated as an independent Mennonite church.

The congregation is involved in the activities of Everence, MEDA, MCC and other Mennonite-related organizations. One of its young adults is participating in Service Adventure.

“We have adopted the coral reef as a symbol for our fellowship,” Gingerich told delegates. She explained that the reef is a place of safety, nurture, diversity and great beauty.

“We have a lot of fun together as a congregation,” said Gingerich. “We sometimes have church at the beach – at this point, someone in the audience declared, ‘It’s not fair!’, which brought laughter to the discussion. “We also have had manatees visit in the creek next to our worship location.”

“We have felt so welcomed here,” referring to CDC, said Gingerich.

Delegates also recognized three congregational transitions. Topeka left MC USA. Salem is actively seeking membership in Ohio Conference. St. John is in a discernment process.

Ministerial Committee

The Ministerial Committee recognized newly installed pastors, those licensed toward ordination and those ordained in 2012-13. Three CDC pastors who died during the past 12 months were remembered with candles being lit in their memory. They were Heidi Siemens-Rhodes, James Bertsche and Don Wyse.

State of the Conference

Out-going conference president, Joyce Schumacher’s, state-of-the-conference address reminded delegates that CDC is a place for worship and discussion and a means of “keeping us responsive to the world around us.”

She read CDC’s mission statement and vision statement to delegates and said, “During the past year, most of our discussion involves our polity.”

Noting the past year has had its delights and conflicts, she reviewed three regional gatherings held in 2013, difficulties with three congregations leaving the conference and the joy of one entering.

“The state of the conference is good,” said Schumacher, concluded, referring to the congregational bouquet, which was created by Lois Kaufmann, conference minister, as the membership roll call was taken earlier on the conference schedule.

CDC in pictures



Top photo: Newly credentialed CDC ministers, Rachel Nolt, Charles Geiser, Lora Nafziger, Ron Wenzel (licensed toward recognition of his Church of the Brethren ordination), Sandy Miller, Joel Miller (installed at Columbus), and Lydia Brenneman.

Second row: Ron Adams and Willis Sommer take communion. Lisa Weaver, CDC board president elect; Ron Guengerich, board president; Joyce Schumacher, past board president; and Lois Kaufmann, conference minister.

Bottom photos: Margaret Sawatsky lights candles remembering CDC ministers who died in 2013. Stones were an object lesson during sermons. Debra Gingerich and Ann Krehbiel of Covenant Mennonite Fellowship.



Top photo: First, Bluffton, children’s choir; Patty Shelly.
Second row: Lois Kaufmann and Journey graduate, Gladene Hershberger; after-hours puzzle project.
Third row: Ministerial Committee, Margaret Sawatsky, Jane Roeschley, Rachel Siemens and Joel Miller.
Bottom photo: Delegates lay hands on newly commissioned CDC leaders; Lynda Nyce, plenary session leader.

Louise Matthews tells Mennonite Women her story

“God began a good work in me”



Louise Matthews using photos to tell her story

Speaking at the CDC Women's Dinner, Louise Matthews used favorite books and photos to explain how she has "lived her story." Paraphrasing Philippians 1:6, Matthews said that "God began a good work in me, and I will be faithful to complete it."

Matthews, director of Bluffton University's Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center, began with a childhood story. She and her brother were sent to break up the ice around the edges of the pond so the cows could drink. Ignoring a warning not to walk on the pond, they did – "as young children will do." Both survived a fall through the ice but later that week, their four-year-old brother, who had Down syndrome, died. That was "forever known as the week my parents nearly lost three children."

As a Mennonite living in New York state, she didn't really notice any differences between herself and others until junior high. Mini-skirts were popular, but Louise dressed in long skirts. In seventh grade, she added the head covering. The feeling of "being different" was clear.

Matthews referred to Steve Seskins'

"Don't Laugh at Me," which deals with bullying and promotes understanding. "Don't laugh at me./ Don't call me names./ Don't get your pleasure from my pain./ In God's eyes we're all the same."

Over the years her parents fostered and adopted children and the family grew to include 11 children. As the eldest child, she helped her parents care for the younger children – preparing her for a future of raising her own children, caring for others, and now working with them.

When it was time for college, Matthews chose Hesston College, where she felt "powerful...felt free to fly. I could fit in for the first time in my life."

At the same time, she met Lawrence Matthews. From West Liberty, he was one of nine children – just one of many things they shared.

From Hesston, she and Lawrence transferred to Bluffton and married between their junior and senior years. After graduating, they began teaching but soon after, Bluffton offered Lawrence a job as director of Marbeck Center. They moved to the university's nature preserve and began their own family of five children.

Referring to Ann Trompert's "The Errant Knight," in which the knight sets out to serve his king, Matthews said "When you serve others you are really serving the King."

When their oldest child, Brendon, was about to enter school, they decided to home school their children – the first family in Bluffton to do so. She also began to offer child care and showed several photos of the children she and her family cared for over the years.

When her older children were grown, she began substitute teaching. When then-president Lee Snyder offered her the job as director of the Lion and Lamb, she agreed though she didn't think she was a "director type." She has discovered that it "blends everything important to me. Children, reading, peace..."

Then "a terrible thing happened" to change their lives. She and Lawrence had a serious car accident. With a broken neck, Lawrence was hospitalized for weeks and returned home wearing a halo. Six weeks later, the university baseball team's bus accident occurred.

Citing the book, "Tear Soup," she said that grief "is not a one-time thing." After their accident and the bus accident, both struggled. In a photo of the couple, Lawrence is wearing his halo and both are smiling. But, said Matthews, "I wasn't okay inside. I learned I had post-traumatic stress disorder. I felt like I'd hit bottom. I was questioning. Then Lawrence quit his job."

"It was a long road," she said, and she had to "dig myself out of a deep hole." A 35th anniversary bike trip from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., was a time of healing.

Concluding her talk, she said that like the Mennonite church, she continues to change, adding "I'm not only evolving, but the Mennonite church is evolving."

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