

God's love—abiding in it ... making it active

The theme of the Central District Conference annual meeting on the campus of Bluffton (Ohio) University centered on abiding in God's love, and the emphasis also included action—transforming how we see ourselves and our relationships with others and how we live out our trust in God's love.

The first activity of the June 22-24 gathering was forging garden implements from guns, a concrete and symbolic act of transformation led by RAWtools, an organization based in Colorado Springs, Colo. Live-streaming video of this work provided a backdrop for the opening worship service in which Mary Sprunger-Froese, artist in residence with RAWtools, told about the history and vision of their work.

Krista Dutt, program coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee in Chicago, then called on worshipers to not simply condemn violence from afar. "We are called to follow God into the messiness of the transformation of violent systems," she said, giving examples of churches and organizations in Chicago that are active on the streets to address violence and systems that perpetuate violence. "Let us step out in faith of God's peace, working in this world to do things we cannot even begin to fathom," she said.



Stephanie Ingram of Lima, Ohio, shared the story of her son's death and her commitment to be an advocate and mentor for youth in her community.




Sounds of the hammer and anvil rang like a bell across the Bluffton University campus as Fred Martin, forger with RAWtools, worked at transforming guns into garden tools. The opening worship began with the story of RAWtools and ended with a call to trust in God's Spirit as we work at transforming the violence and needs in our communities.



Photos by J. Tyler Klassen

Stephanie Ingram from Lima, Ohio, told the story of her son's death by gun violence. She recounted the pain of finding his body and of learning to live, as she described it, "with a piece of me missing." She gives credit to God and her faith for the strength to not want retaliation, and she has become an advocate and mentor for youth in Lima.

Read more reports on Annual Meeting worship, plenary and business sessions on the following pages. 

Annual meeting worship services

Exploring symbols of vines, branches, seeds and fruit

“I am the true vine” begins John 15, the theme text for the 2017 CDC Annual Meeting. Worship services explored the passage that followed in different ways, each time emphasizing that we are to abide in God’s love and that our love must be visible in our actions.

The Friday evening conversational sermon gave participants an opportunity to hear reflections from three people: Doug Luginbill, CDC conference minister; Lefuarn Harvey, coordinator for Mennonite Mission Network; and Jorge Vielman, Mennonite Central Committee Great Lakes peace and justice coordinator. Doug began the conversation about abiding, bearing fruit, being pruned and loving one another as God loves us.

Lefuarn reflected, “God wants us branches to experience the power of the Holy Ghost in our lives. He wants us to experience his unconditional love for us, his forgiveness, his saving grace and his mercy.” She added that God has given us the commandment to love one another, and “by letting the light of Jesus show in us and through us in how we interact with others, we in turn will bear more fruit.”

Our love for each other must result in action, Jorge emphasized. Noting that it is easy for people in power to dismiss their privilege or status because they inherited it, Jorge said, “I challenge us today to let God prune that sentiment, and replace it with a willingness to advocate for those who are hidden in the shadows; stand up for those who have no voice, for the ones whose rights are denied, and love them like God wants us to love.”

The sermon at the final worship service was a conversation between Anita Rediger, pastor of Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, and Emily Hedrick, pastor of Lima Mennonite Church. In it, Emily read the text from John 15 in which Jesus tells his disciples that whoever does not bear fruit will be thrown away. Anita said she has begun hearing a word of comfort rather than warning in this passage. “Don’t worry,”



In Friday’s worship service, Doug Luginbill, Jorge Vielman and Lefuarn Harvey talked with each other about the John 15 imagery of the vine and branches (with the visual behind them) and about abiding in God’s love and bearing fruit.

she hears in the text, “You can’t ever be apart from me.” God’s love is the root of the vine, she emphasized, “and any fruit that grows from the root and is nurtured by the branches of the community of God’s people has within it a seed.... Wherever that fruit may go, it bears the image of God,” Anita said. ©

Children participate in the Annual Meeting

Special time for children was included in each worship service, including this conversation about pruning, led by Tim Byers. Other activities for children in grades K-6 included a T-shirt craft, making bread, a scavenger hunt on the campus, a service project and working with a Bible theme verse. Childcare for younger children was also provided during adult sessions. ©



Photos by J. Tyler Klassen

Love must involve action, Drew Hart emphasized

Drew Hart, author, professor and activist, challenged Annual Meeting participants to understand how our culture's view of race has shaped them and to take Jesus' call to love others as a call to action.

"Race is a way of seeing and being seen in the world," the author of *The Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*, said. "It's like a filter through which we interact and experience the world. We don't even realize sometimes the degree to which it distorts our



J. Tyler Klassen

Drew Hart challenged Annual Meeting participants to understand how concepts of race in our culture have shaped them and how Jesus' call to radical love means taking action.

perception, our ways of seeing other people and the way people see us. We have to realize that even when we think we are just being objective, race is interfering and interacting with how we perceive others and ourselves."


Race is more complicated than skin color; "it's a way of being in the world; a way of identifying and living and organizing our society," Hart explained. "When we begin to understand that, then we begin to see that there is something troubling and problematic about whiteness and how it forms and shapes people."

Hart acknowledged that while the people present did not start this system of race and privilege, we participate in it. We not only participate in it but also 'contribute in our everyday choices to reaffirming the world

as it is. We don't always think of our choices in that way—that we are rebuilding a white supremacist world by our actions every day, reaffirming the part that world is having on other communities all the time."

Jesus calls us to love others in ways that are counter to what our society teaches and how our society is structured. "Radical love calls us to identify with the shared humanity of others, to act on their liberation and their wellbeing, and to accept the consequences and costs that come along with that kind of action," Hart emphasized. "Radical love is the antidote to the one-dimensional way of viewing people in the world. It calls us to empathize and to see people's full humanity and to act—to radically act in the moment in response to what is going on."

Hart ended his presentation with this call to act. "If we are going to love people in a racialized society, it's time to get to work in solidarity with those who are challenging mass incarceration and white supremacy and patriarchy and xenophobia and all these things that are crushing down and killing people and destroying lives and dehumanizing people. The antidote is love ... to take this other trajectory that leads us into solidarity and struggle with those who are the most vulnerable, to see people's humanity, to take actions necessary to actually demonstrate the love we have for them in radical action."

Hart, a former pastor, holds a PhD in theology and ethics and teaches at Messiah College, Grantham, Pa. 

Annual Meeting numbers

- 188: people registered
- 94: delegates present
- 28: CDC congregations represented
Also represented were the Berea, Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Jubilee congregations and Allegheny Mennonite Conference.
- 61: the number of Annual Meetings CDC has held

Doug's Mug

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

We have been drinking a lot of smoothies in our home this summer. Typically, lots of different ingredients go into them, especially if my spouse, Paula, is making them. Milk; yogurt; frozen banana; various canned, frozen and fresh fruit; and spinach.



(There's always more spinach when Paula makes them!) They are nutritious, refreshing and each one is a little different.

That pretty much describes our Central District Conference Annual Meetings.


I experienced this year's gathering in Bluffton on June 22-24 as spiritually nutritious, emotionally refreshing and containing a wide variety of ingredients. And thankfully, most things went quite smoothly! (Thanks to Conference Administrator Emma Hartman and the local committee for your excellent planning and attention to details!)

One of my hopes for our Annual Meeting was that there be opportunity to experience both *centering in God* and *stretching toward faithful action*. Our newest congregation, Open Table Mennonite Fellowship, led a seminar entitled "Peacemaking Grounded in Prayer." At the same time the sounds of a hammer on an anvil rang out as a gun was transformed into a garden tool. Our delegate work was interspersed with

lively singing and silent centering. One moment we were reminded, "Be still and know that I am God." The next minute we were called to "love those we have been socialized not to love." Our action is without root if not grounded in Christ. Our worship is without fruit if not transforming our lives.

The Annual Meeting theme, "Abounding in Love, Abiding in Grace," also has this action/centering quality. We were reminded throughout our worship and our work together that unless we abide in Christ, we wither away. Remaining in Christ, the True Vine, is our source of life, of faith and of hope.

The many voices of conference attendees, voices of 80 year-old life-long leaders as well as teenage youth delegates, created a wonderful mix of challenge and reassurance. The presence of three congregations wishing to affiliate with CDC as well as congregations who have always been part of CDC also added energy, hope and the realization that our conference continues to change, shift and make space for those who find joy in our way of being church together. By the way, please stop by and visit Berea Mennonite, Chapel Hill Mennonite, Open Table Mennonite, and Raleigh Mennonite when you find yourself in their communities.

In the coming year, continue to draw nourishment, refreshment and joy from the rich variety of faith-forming experiences in your home congregation as well as with sisters and brothers throughout the Conference. 



Participants surrounded leaders in a commissioning prayer at the Friday delegate session. This group blessed Anna Yoder Schlabach, president-elect; and Tim Stair, new member of the Missional Church Committee. L to R: Omie Baumgartner, Jim Mohr, Mary Beth Huser, Anna Yoder Schlabach, Janeen Bertsche Johnson, Rosalie Grove, Tim Stair, Jake Hess, Trevor Bechtel, Carrie Mast and Brenda North Martin.

CDC's changing landscape

The “ever-changing, growing, transforming landscape of Central District” was the theme of Lisa Weaver’s state of the conference report at the Annual Meeting business sessions. She focused on ways in which congregational membership in the conference is changing:

After a year of discernment, **Open Table Mennonite Fellowship** was accepted into the conference with a unanimous vote by delegates.

Applying for membership: Three congregations—Berea Mennonite Church, Atlanta, Ga.; Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, Chapel Hill, N.C.; and Raleigh Mennonite Church, Raleigh, N.C.—have applied for membership in CDC, transferring from other regional conferences. After this coming year of discernment, delegates at the next annual meeting will vote on welcoming them. (Future issues of **focus** will highlight these three congregations.)



CDC President Lisa Weaver listens during meeting discussions.

J. Tyler Klassen

Allegheny Mennonite Conference, consisting of 14 congregations, is discerning three options: 1) remaining as an independent conference; 2) disbanding and blessing each congregation to affiliate with a conference of choice; 3) joining CDC as a group. Steps are beginning for CDC and Allegheny to get better acquainted in this discernment time.

As CDC embraces more congregations over a wider geographical area, Lisa said, “This is an invitation for the entire Central District community to think creatively, joyfully and energetically about how to build bridges and create sustainable meaningful relationships with individuals, with pastors and between congregations across time and space.”

Lisa turned over her gavel to Arman Habegger, the new president of CDC, at the end of the Annual Meeting. Anna Yoder Schlabach is the new president-elect. ©



Mary E. Klassen

Grace Hitt (left), of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship, and Simia Yoder, from Faith Mennonite Church, were the two youth delegates at the CDC Annual Meeting.

Financial report

June 30, 2017

Thanks to continued strong financial support from Central District Conference congregations and from individuals and families, the financial picture of CDC is quite positive. While we don’t yet have final numbers for the fiscal year that closed on June 30, total revenue through May 31 was \$203,928 against the June 30 goal of \$234,516. June is usually a good month on the revenue side so we’re optimistic the goal will be reached.

Total conference expenses through May 31 were less than budgeted, so we’re anticipating some excess as we close the books on fiscal year 2017.

On June 24 at the CDC annual meeting at Bluffton University, the delegates approved the spending plan for fiscal year 2018. The increase from FY 2017 was very slight, going up by only \$1,364—to \$235,880 up from \$234,516. Thanks again to all for the outstanding support of your conference.

Report provided by Roger Nafziger, conference treasurer

Delegates to MC USA Convention

The following were the CDC delegates to the Mennonite Church USA Convention in Orlando, Fla., July 4–8: Emma Hartman, Arman Habegger, Cyneatha Millsaps, Janeen Bertsche Johnson and Doug Luginbill. CDC also had two delegates in the Step-Up youth program: Simia Yoder and Aaron Johnson.

Six from CDC graduate from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

Six students connected with Central District Conference congregations graduated May 20 from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind.:


Andrew Austin, Jr., of Blue Springs, Mo., earned a Master of Divinity degree with a concentration in Theological Studies: Biblical Studies. Austin is pursuing a pastoral ministry assignment. He and Sophia Austin, his spouse, have attended Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart.

Alison Brookins of Madison, Wisc., earned a Master of Divinity degree. She will serve as pastor of Chicago Community Mennonite Church starting in August. This summer, she will work with Ted & Company TheaterWorks to take her original show, *Discovery: A Comic Lament*, on its first live tour.

J. Tyler Klassen of Goshen earned a Master of Arts in Christian Formation degree. He will continue managing the Chain Reaction Bicycle Project, a community bike project, in Goshen, and will explore work as a spiritual director. He and Mary E. Klassen, his wife, are members of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church.

Tobias Arwa Magatti of Shirati-Rorya, Mara, Tanzania, and Goshen, earned a Master of Arts: Peace Studies degree with a concentration in International Development Administration. He plans to work with organizations that help disadvantaged individuals and work with peace and justice issues. He will continue to volunteer for Tanzania Education Aid, Inc., to advocate for women's education in local areas of Shirati.

Peter Martin of Cassopolis, Mich., earned a Master of Divinity degree with a concentration in Theological Studies: Peace Studies. He will continue living at Camp Friedenswald in Cassopolis, where Jenna Liechty Martin, his spouse, is the executive director. They attend

Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen. **Kristine Regehr** of Hesston, Kan., and Grand Marais, Minn., earned a Master of Divinity degree with a concentration in Pastoral Ministry. She will complete a supervised ministry experience at College Mennonite Church in Goshen this summer and fall and then pursue a pastoral ministry assignment. She is a member of Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen. 



Andrew Austin



Alison Brookins



J. Tyler Klassen



Tobias Magatti




Peter Martin



Kristine Regehr

Jonathan Weishaupt licensed

On Sunday, May 21, Jonathan Weishaupt was licensed for specific ministry as Pastor of Discipling and Youth at Silverwood Mennonite Church. He was previously installed, along with Aimee Wieshaupt, his wife, on February 5. 



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