



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

Reporter

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

JULY 2011



2011 CDC
annual meeting

Saying “Yes” to God

Karl Shelly, out-going CDC president, delivered the state of the conference address

By Ryan Miller

More than 175 participants from 31 congregations gathered at Silverwood Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind., June 23-25 to spend time in community considering how to say “YES” to God, and how to respond to God’s “YES” to humanity.

Speakers, leaders and delegates repeatedly pondered how to respond affirmatively to God and to one another in the midst of differences.

Speakers, leaders and delegates to the Central District Conference annual meeting repeatedly asked and pondered how to respond affirmatively to God and to one another in the midst of differences.

Worship leaders, teachers and preachers explored different ways of examining familiar stories, including creation, the exodus, Zaccheus, the feeding of the 5,000, and the decision (re-

counted in Acts) to welcome Gentiles into the church. Church representatives told stories of how “yeses” have inspired and changed their congregational lives. And delegates said, “YES,” to a new conference spending plan, a slate of representatives and another three-year term for Lois Johns Kaufmann, conference minister.

Participants also spent time meeting members of St. Paul (Minn.) Mennonite Fellowship, a congregation applying for CDC membership.

Conference stitched together

In his state-of-the-conference address, Karl Shelly, CDC president from Assembly, Goshen, said conference members must focus on how they address their similarities and differences. He referenced a quilt created from demographic pie charts representing congregations across the conference.

“We are a multi-hued collection of Anabaptist congregations stitched together,” Shelly said, noting shared values of worshiping, building community service, making new disciples,

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Lois Kaufmann, CDC conference minister, addresses delegates

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peacemaking and connecting with the global church, all with Jesus Christ at the center.

Shelly passed the president’s gavel to president-elect Joyce Schumacher from Grace, Pandora.

Worship: God’s YES and our YES

Worship leaders Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau of Eighth Street, Goshen, and David Moser of Southside Fellowship, Elkhart, began the worship experience by reminding us that every one of God’s promises is a “yes” to us, and we who hunger and thirst for God respond by saying “yes” to God.

Gwen Gustafson-Zook, Faith, Goshen, led abundant music with instrumentalists Faithful Bread. Trish Habegger and Sueann VonGunten of Hively Avenue, Elkhart, Bob Coon of Topeka (Ind.), and Matt Hickman of Mennonite Church of Normal (Ill.) read scriptures.

During Thursday’s opening worship, Ron Guengerich, Silverwood, said, “God’s yes is not just in creating stuff, but in creating community.” He differentiated community from empire – while the latter is about power and control, the former is about sharing and mutuality.

God’s great “yes” gifts, Guengerich

said, include creation, deliverance from oppression (as exemplified in the Exodus), the story of Jesus, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Guengerich led the group in singing “My heart soars,” a poem/hymn from Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation in British Columbia. Guengerich added his own stanzas to George’s text and encouraged others to do the same as they expand God’s yes to us into our mission for God.

Friday night, Heidi Siemens-Rhodes, Assembly, asked worshipers to consider the possibility that the story of Zaccheus is Jesus’ vindication of an honest man. Siemens-Rhodes noted that Luke describes another changeable tax collector, the man whose humble prayers contrast with the prayers of the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14).

Perhaps the height-challenged Zaccheus was rich and honest, even if seen as a sinner by those around him. His efforts to see Christ lead to “yesses” of validation and economic renewal.

“Jesus challenges the good people of Jericho’s assumptions of who is in and who is out,” Siemens-Rhodes said. In, she said, are those who find ways to see Jesus, moving around

what is blocking their full view of Christ – perhaps habits of thought, grudges, lack of information, or an inability to acknowledge the seeking faith of others.

“We understand (the Bible) and we model our lives on it in surprisingly different ways. This can put us directly in the Jericho crowds, thinking that others who see things differently are out of bounds,” she said. “This is a complicated world and it is so very easy to judge rather than to extend a yes.”

At Saturday’s closing worship, James Rissler of Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship, offered a different way of reading Luke’s account of the feeding of the 5,000. Imagine, he said, Christ’s gift not as direct provision like manna from heaven, but as a way of filling both spiritual and physical needs by a series of actions. The boy who brought the loaves and fishes was the first to come to Jesus that evening after Jesus tells his disciples to feed the crowd.

“Is there enough? Are you hungry? Come. This is what we have, freely and generously given,” Rissler said, paraphrasing Christ’s words. He described reactions to the boy’s generosity. “Not even realizing what they are doing, they pull out the bread,

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Wally Shellenberger, Paoli receives a peace mug from Lois Kaufmann-Hunsberger, Maplewood, and Ted Larri-son, Paoli.



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the bits of cheese they had brought along that they had kept until they were alone, knowing that it was not enough to share.”

Rissler said the thought of Christ inspiring generosity is as impressive as a metaphysical miracle. This sort of transformation can, should and does happen among us when we say “YES” to the Holy Spirit’s invitation. Lois Kaufmann said CDC delegates may not be unlike the group gathered around Jesus – weary, tired, hungry, in need of healing and wondering if there is enough. She said unity among conference members, around the Lord’s Table, is a way of saying “yes” to Jesus and to one another.

Joel Kauffmann of Center for Healing and Hope, Tim Stair of Southside Fellowship, and Tami Schlabach of Topeka offered responses to the messages. Delegates donated \$365 to the center as a way to give back to the Goshen community.

Approaching scripture together

Loren Johns, professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, led delegates through historical and modern ways of interpreting the Bible, concluding with his guide to discerning while staying in community.

Johns suggested conference members can maintain unity during difficult conversations by delighting in one another and scripture; focusing on the Holy Spirit; listening and noting God’s presence; speaking clearly; being mature; praying for wisdom; discerning side-by-side rather than across tables; and recognizing that God occasionally calls for “mind-boggling paradigm shifts.”

Johns said today’s conversation often focuses on homosexuality. For early church members, it was circumcision and Gentile inclusion. He asked delegates to examine the early church’s debate, recounted in Acts 15 and Galatians 2.

Table groups noted the text describes early church members not as focusing on scriptural commands, but on discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Johns said we must both wrestle with biblical texts and allow the difficult, sometimes opposing texts to wrestle with one another. The preservation of these disparate voices in the canon should remind us that God’s people have always been working with shifting, not static, understandings of God.

Johns called on leaders to challenge polarized interpretation, where relationships are ended due to

disagreement. Instead, he said, the church must value people and their interpretations, even if the community determines some responses to be unacceptable.

Johns’ full presentation is available through Emma Hartman at the CDC office.

Introducing St. Paul

Members of St. Paul told stories about polarized biblical interpretation as they introduced themselves and their congregation. Members hope to transfer their affiliation to CDC from Central Plains Mennonite Conference, where they are provisional members with no voting privileges because of their support for GLBT individuals and family members.

After several introductions, four St. Paul representatives spent an hour in conversation with delegates. They told stories of their personal and communal experiences, their relationships with one another and with Central Plains, and their hopes for themselves and for a new conference relationship.

James Rissler, who introduced the congregation, said St. Paul “does not want to be a single-issue congregation. (They are) looking for a family where their gifts will be welcomed

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New CDC credentialed pastors, from left, Matt Hickman, Mennonite Church of Normal, Miriam Zehr, Oak Grove, Jeremy Shue, Silverwood, Aimee Weishaupt Silverwood, Heidi Siemens Rhodes, Assembly.



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and affirmed and where they can offer themselves and their faith journeys to us.”

Members said St. Paul was a mission site formed out of Faith Mennonite Church in response to racial tensions in the neighborhood. It hosted a voluntary service unit and its members – who now number seven and share lay leadership – struggled against racism, sexism and heterosexism. Members said the painful struggles over conference polity led them to CDC, and have left them working to rebuild their community after years of loss.

Lois Kaufmann, conference minister, said Central Plains leadership has walked with St. Paul and CDC through the transition process and is releasing the congregation with a blessing, though there are still tensions among Central Plains members.

Delegates will discern the St. Paul request for membership at the 2012 annual meeting.

Divine affirmations, conferencewide

Three congregations shared stories of their own “yesses” to God. Kerry Strayer of Columbus listed myriad young adults serving across the church and the world. She said members teach justice and peace out loud, sharing stories to create a missional culture that is faithful to the justice and peace position of Mennonite Church USA.

Paul Verslius of Shalom, Indianapolis, Ind., described the act of cleaning up an adopted stretch of highway. He said a decade of gathering tire shreds, burger wrappers, chip bags, bungee cords – even bottles filled with urine – offers an avenue to understand forgiveness and redemption. Each return trip with garbage bags finds the roadside trashed, but they clean anyway.

Sueann VonGunten of Hively Avenue discussed hospitality. One Sunday school class offered a challenge to extend hospitality to a stranger one week. After a conversation at the YMCA, one of those strangers began attending church and has offered blessings to other members in return.

In other action, delegates:

- Approved a \$203,927 spending plan for 2011-2012, a 2.3 percent increase over 2010-2011. The plan, which follows several years of significant spending cuts, asks for slightly higher congregational giving and does not match denominational guidelines for salaries and benefits.
- Affirmed nominees for conference committees:
 - Ron Guengerich, Silverwood, board of directors president-elect.
 - Tim Stair, Southside Fellowship, board of directors member-at-large.
 - Jep Hostetler, Columbus, ministerial committee.
 - Omie Boumgartner, Silverwood,

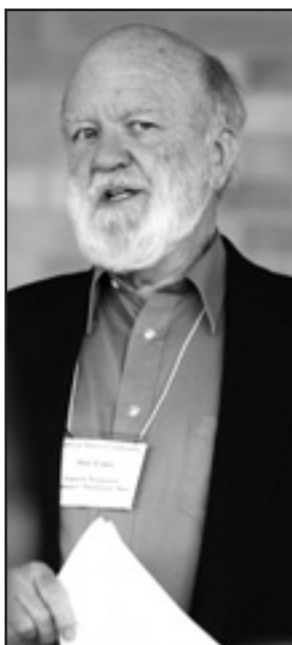
missional church committee.

- Janeen Bertsche Johnson, Eighth Street, missional church committee.
- Gerald Mast, First Mennonite Bluffton, missional church committee.
- Randy Keeler, St. John, annual meeting program committee.
- Jim Bare, Eighth Street, Camp Friedenswald.
- David Moser, Southside Fellowship, Camp Friedenswald.
- Kevin Nickel, First Mennonite Bluffton, Camp Friedenswald.
- Approved another three-year term for Lois Johns Kaufmann, conference minister.
- Recognized Journey graduates Nora Harris and Jane Bowers.
- Awarded a peace mug, sponsored by CDC and Peace and Justice Support Network, to Wally and Evie Shellenberger of Paoli for their long-time work in the Middle East.
- Were encouraged to form task groups to partner together to address needs that cannot be done alone and to apply for Reign of God grants through the conference. Contact the conference office for more information.
- Approved changes to the conference bylaws involving legal incorporation language.
- Offered gratitude to hosts, planners, presenters and participants of the 2011 annual meeting.

Photo gallery



Joyce Schumacher



Don Yoder



Loren Johns



Ruth Guengerich



Jim Smith



Emily North



Top: Patricia Habegger and Sueanne VonGunten



Left: Lisa Pierce, Frank Trnka, James Rissler, David Edminster, Karen Abshier

Ryan Miller, Southside Fellowship, covered the annual meeting for the Reporter. He wrote the stories and took the photos.

Annual meeting Listening Committee report

Listening Committee members: Jan Lugibihl, Gerald Mast, Willard Roth

As members of the listening committee attended to the words we heard during worship, business meetings, workshops, and conversations, we discovered three images of the Spirit's movement that exhibit what God may be doing in the Central District Conference. Central District Conference is saying yes, percolating up and offering ourselves.

Saying Yes

"God's yes gives us the church and we are given as God's bread and wine."

"We say yes to God when we respond more out of delight than duty."

"Responding to Jesus in delight is life-giving, not cheap."

"The St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship feels a deep sense of coming home and of being received with open arms."

"Hospitality to strangers is greater than reverence to God."

"Everyone who seeks to follow Jesus is part of the kingdom."

"If we only understand 50% of the Bible, we're doing pretty well."

- ◆ We heard and sang the promise of God's yes and our hearts soared.
- ◆ We rejoice that God's working in and around and through us is a story of yes upon yes.
- ◆ We were challenged to climb new trees and shift our perspectives in response to the vast yes of God.
- ◆ We are saying yes
 - To being honest as we name pain rather than sweeping conflict under the carpet; in so doing we celebrate even as we lament.
 - To declaring that "small" can be a dynamic adjective meaning energetic and passionate.
 - To accenting and involving the younger generation in our congregational and district endeavors.

Percolating Up

"Perhaps we can learn from the heritage and ideals of the General Conference tradition."

"Perhaps the relationship-based polity that we practice in Central District is percolating up."

"When we break bread, despite our differences, we are climbing the sycamore tree."

"We look at Central District Conference as a vital part of Mennonite Church USA."

- ◆ CDC is as colorful as the quilt blocks from each regional gathering – pieced and knotted together with Christ at the center.
- ◆ We are a laugh out loud, dance at the hop, sing in harmony conference.
- ◆ We teach our young people then release them into the world to find their yes; we engage in a spirituality of the road, cleaning it up and going back to do it over and over again; we step out of our comfort zones into the whirlpool to practice biblical hospitality; we work in centers of healing and hope; we are normal, everyday people moving together in harmony toward new "yesses."
- ◆ We are percolating up
 - Remembering we live our lives primarily in congregations rather than conferences or denominations.
 - Beginning our conference business sessions by listening to compelling congregational stories of holy hospitality.
 - Encouraging missional task groups; offering Reign of God grants thus honoring CDC commitment to congregational creativity.

Offering Ourselves

"We need each other to more fully be the body of Christ."

"In becoming ministers to each other, we have become more like our Anabaptist forefathers and foremothers."

"St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship wants a place to offer themselves."

"Staying in relationship with each other is not easy and separating from each other is not easy."

"Last year we exceeded our spending plan goals."

"I want you to know that I value your prayers for this conference and I want you to know that I love my work."

"Perspective changes everything."

- ◆ We are intentional and relational and we care deeply about process and how we are with each other. More and more, we see this as a gift to be shared.
- ◆ We are ready to claim who CDC is as a conference and to celebrate the gifts we have been given.
- ◆ We are more ready to say that our response, our yes, includes sharing CDC's gifts and ourselves with the broader Mennonite church.
- ◆ We are offering ourselves
 - Celebrating 12 decades of Congo mission incarnated in the life of our host congregation, Silverwood.
 - Experiencing authentic reconciliation among Friedenswald staff marked by integrity and care as sisters and brothers.
 - Enjoying a healthy sense of humor quickly visible even to our guests.
 - Asking profound questions, such as:
 - Which First Mennonite Church was really first?
 - Which commentary should I use so I don't have to think?
 - What if I understand only 50% of what is going on around here?

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