

June 26 Annual Meeting explores power, prejudice and inclusion

Begin with our own confession and transformation

With a call for confession, grace and transformation, Betty Pries helped Annual Meeting participants explore how they personally and how their congregations can be more open to diversity and inclusion of others who are different. At the June 26 Annual Meeting of Central District Conference, Betty preached in the morning worship service and led an afternoon session on “Building equitable, diverse and inclusive congregations.”

Rooting her presentations in the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Last Supper, Betty invited everyone to step into humility and vulnerability as an essential beginning point.

Opening worship service

In her sermon on the Good Samaritan, Betty suggested that we should be careful of identifying with only the hero of the story. We also should put ourselves in the place of the priest and Levite who protected themselves and their families. We should put ourselves in the place of the victim, allowing others to serve us—others whom we do not know or whom we find distasteful. We should put ourselves in the place of the thieves—those who have done harm, sometimes because of the groups to which they belong. “To love God is to love one’s neighbor and to love one’s neighbor is to love God,” Betty concluded. “It is one love. Go and do thou likewise.”

Afternoon seminar

In the afternoon extended seminar, Betty again emphasized our need to be vulnerable, our need to allow grace for ourselves and others, our need for confession—all on the way to our own transformation. These themes are reflected in the following excerpts from her presentation.

“When it comes to truly being equitable, diverse and inclusive, every single one of us is going to fall down. Our goal is to fall down less often; our goal is to also to learn how to get up again ... We are all on this journey together in terms of what to do with privilege when we have it and what to do with inequity when we see it, especially when we see it in ourselves.”

“That text [Love your neighbor as yourself] will always put a lie to the layering of a people into a society of who’s better and who’s worse When Jesus said, ‘I am the host and I will wash the feet of the people,’ that was a radical act in that moment in time. There was something about foot washing that was embedded into the last supper event that really was quite revolutionary and seeks to upend this caste system that defines our society. What would it be like to clothe ourselves in the spirit

Continued on page 2



Betty Pries, seminar leader during the Annual Meeting

Annual Meeting seminar

[of that revolutionary ritual], put on that apron and wash each other's feet? How would that change our experience of isms and caste in our society?"

“It is not until we have gone into our own stories of being on the receiving and giving ends of prejudice that we are able to be present to other people's experiences of being on the receiving and giving end of prejudice. The journey of transformation for our congregations always starts here. These are important stories to tell and I would say they are the seed bed of our transformations.”

“It is easier for me to have compassion for someone whose remarks I experience as offensive if I can see that I also have some of those thoughts sometimes in me When we make space in our spirits for acknowledging the ways we have contributed to the marginalization of others, the more there is space in our spirits for others who have done the same.”

“We cannot just change issues of prejudice and racism and discrimination at the level of individual behaviors alone; we have to look at the level of policies and the powerful ideas that contribute [to the behaviors].”


“We have to get good at confession. If we could lean into confession, we might be able to recognize our powerful ideas and recognize policies that are in place that are producing individual behaviors [of prejudice].”

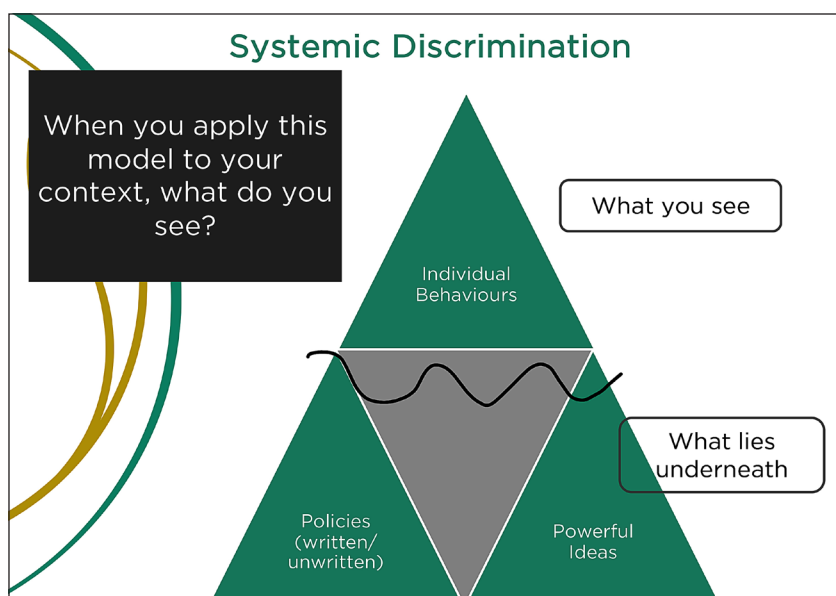
“None of us ever arrives in this work. Our goal is not to get there, because that means we have stopped learning and stopped being curious. Our goal is to always be on the journey, and this journey requires significant grace; it requires significant empathy; it requires action and patience.”

“A big part of this work of diversity and inclusion is our own transformation. How are we being transformed into the likeness of Christ on an ongoing basis?

How do we die to our privilege and wake up to grace? How do we die to our pain and wake up to our healing? How do we go about this work not only from a policy basis but from a deeply transformative spirituality? That's where the excitement lies, because then we are not just changing our congregations to be equitable, diverse and inclusive because we are checking a box; we are transforming our congregations because **we** are being transformed.”

Betty Pries, CEO of Credence & Co., (www.credenceandco.com), is a conflict, change and mediation specialist based in Ontario. She has 28 years of experience in coaching, mediating, training and consulting. She also is an adjunct professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind.

A recording of the Annual Meeting worship service is available on the Central District Conference website: mcusacdc.org/2021-annual-meeting. For a recording of Betty Pries's seminar, contact the conference office: office@mcusacdc.org. 



Above the wavy line in this slide from Betty Pries's presentation are individual behaviors. Below the line, where they are not seen, are policies (written and unwritten) and powerful ideas. Betty asked listeners to consider what policies and powerful ideas shape our behaviors but lie unseen beneath the surface. Addressing behaviors is not enough, Betty emphasized; we also must address these underlying policies and ideas.

Opening the 2021 Annual Meeting, Doug Luginbill, conference minister said, “We are 46 congregations in 11 states.” (See map below.) Then he described the conference:

“We are congregations committed to Anabaptist values of community, peace and ongoing transformation.

“We are individuals on our own spiritual journeys, yet recognizing we are not alone.

“We are people of faith, yearning for God’s beloved community to be realized in our homes, among our congregations, throughout our neighborhoods and beyond our national borders.”

By the end of the delegate business session, the opening line was amended to “48 congregations in 11 states.”



This map shows the locations of CDC congregations.

Annual Meeting business

Anna Yoder Schlabach, conference president, opened the 65th Annual Meeting by reflecting both on the stability of the conference and the areas where something new is emerging.

Conference leadership and finances are stable, Anna noted.

Through the past year some expenses have been less while contributions have been generous. With Doug Luginbill in his fifth year as conference



minister and Emma Hartman in her 20th year as administrator, “steady leadership at the helm is a gift,” Anna said.

The agenda for the meeting included welcoming two new congregations (see below), and Anna pointed to several new communities of faith emerging in Charlotte and Wilmington, N.C.; Columbus, Ohio; and Palm Beach, Fla.

Anna said, “CDC continues to be the place where congregations are encouraged and affirmed in the many ways they carry out their calls. All of us are working in our unique locations to follow Jesus in multi-colored and creative and fiercely loving ways.”

Anna’s term as president of CDC ended with this Annual Meeting. James Rissler, from Atlanta (Ga.) Mennonite Fellowship, is the new president, and Jan Luginbill, member of Chicago (Ill.) Community Mennonite Church, is the incoming president-elect.

Delegate actions

Delegates voted to affirm the minutes of the 2020 Annual Meeting, the spending plan for 2021–22, and the slate of officers and committee members. Also, two congregations were welcomed into the conference: Grand Rapids (Mich.) Mennonite Fellowship and Keller Park Church in South Bend, Ind.

After the votes, Anna said, “We are a different conference now that you are a part of us. We welcome the gifts you will bring and look forward to who we will become with you.”

Continued on page 4

Annual Meeting business (continued)

Journey graduate

Jan Croyle, pastor of First Mennonite Church, Wadsworth, Ohio, was honored during the Annual Meeting as a new graduate of Journey.



Jan Croyle

This three-year program offers pastoral and theological education for people in their own contexts. It emphasizes biblical understanding, Anabaptist history, missional leadership, preaching, spiritual formation and self-awareness.

Journey is a program of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and CDC is one of the sponsoring conferences for Journey.

Committee reports

Missional Church Committee members Mark Rupp and Kiva Nice-Webb reported on their work over the last year. One emphasis has

been encouraging congregations to take next steps toward undoing racism. The committee is providing resources to encourage this work, including \$500 grants to congregations for anti-racism work and nudging pastors and congregations to use the Widerstand anti-racism training. (For information, visit the CDC website, mcusacdc.org or contact the conference office.)

A second emphasis is supporting new communities of faith and congregations looking for revitalization. Watch for resources in these areas in the next year.

In the **Ministerial Committee** report, Ray Person explained that the committee is examining power levels in the church. They are looking at how the committee has participated in these power dynamics in the past, how they continue to do this and how “we can repent and transform ourselves as we move into the future.” They are interested in hearing stories from clergy who have been affected by unhealthy power dynamics, especially women and those who identify as LGBTQ. ☮

Mennonite women host conversation with Melissa Florer-Bixler

Melissa Florer-Bixler was invited by CDC’s Mennonite Women into a conversation about her new book, *How to have an enemy: Righteous anger and the work of peace*, as the last element of the CDC Annual Meeting.

In the last several years, with conflicts—sometimes violent conflicts—emerging in the US, “it felt like I had enemies in a new way—in a way different than I had in the past,” Melissa explained. So she went to Scripture to see what it says about enemies. The questions that emerged for her were: “Who is my enemy? To whom am I an enemy? What does love look like if we take that seriously?”

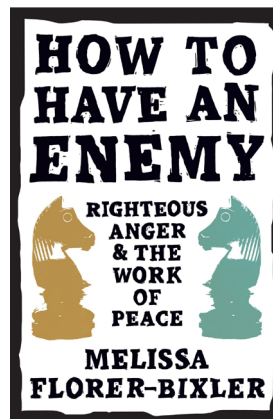


She saw that differences by themselves do not create an enemy. “What shifts difference or

division to enmity is power.”

This means that in our congregations we need to attend to what differences or divisions harm others. If there is harm, Melissa encouraged listeners to figure out what power structures are behind those experiences.

Melissa encouraged listeners to take home



questions about how we view the purpose of our congregations. “That can give you a good sense of how your congregation is thinking about who they are and what they do. Then you might be able to open other conversations about what it means to live in this world of conflict,” Melissa concluded.

How to have an enemy is published by Herald Press: heraldpress.com/books/how-to-have-an-enemy/ ☮

Doug's Mug: Transformation

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

I'm packing my bags for MennoCon21* in Cincinnati. (By the time you read this it will have happened!) I don't quite know what to expect. Will there be hugs and handshakes? Will the singing be glorious? What will it be like with a few hundred people wandering around a



convention center that can host thousands! Mask or no mask? Will I be changed?

Four years ago at MennoCon17 in Orlando, delegates helped shape what has come to be known as the Renewed Commitments. These guiding commitments

are ***Follow Jesus, Witness to God's Peace, and Experience Transformation.***

It is the third commitment, *Experience Transformation*, that has filled my mug and sat on my desk recently. I'm not sure I'm ready to drink it! Do I really want to experience transformation? Do I honestly want to be changed?

In defining *Experience Transformation*, we are told, "The Holy Spirit dwells in and among us, transforming us to reflect God's love." Seems simple enough. But, like the lawyer who pressed Jesus about being neighborly, I wonder how far that reflection of God's love is supposed to shine? As an individual, am I transformed (polished?) enough to let that love shine on all I meet? As a congregation, conference, or denomination, just how far and wide are we able to reflect God's love?

At our Central District virtual Annual Meeting on June 26, Betty Pries from Credence & Company helped us explore how we might build "Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive Congregations." The parable of the Good Samaritan was the foundational text. She invited us to explore who we identify with in the story: the Samaritan, the religious leaders, the thieves, the injured one? I never considered identifying myself as one of the thieves! Yet, Betty took us there. She invited us to reflect on

how we might sometimes be one of the thieves, taking what is not ours, causing injury and pain, showing disregard for the humanity of another. It was a humbling moment as I reflected on the privilege I've enjoyed ever since an adventurous ancestor purchased cheap land from the US government in 1832, land that was then "unoccupied" because of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Or as I recalled my criticism and disregard of Hopi leaders when I was in Voluntary Service. Or when I avoid minority-owned businesses. Or when I justify decisions that are motivated by racism (conscious or unconscious). Or when I'm less generous with my resources than I might be.

Another comment by Betty really caught my attention; **"We can't go out until we have gone in."** We can't change the world unless we have been changed. We can't demand transformation of others unless we are also willing to be transformed. And this brings me back to my original question. Do I really want to be transformed?

There's no formula for change. There's no magic potion to drink. There's no rubric to follow. Except, perhaps, to begin with confession!

Again, Betty stated, **"To truly be transformative in the communities in which we live, we must move into confession and compassion."**

We cannot confess what we cannot claim. What would true confession look like in our congregations? How might our confessions make space for deep and honest transformation? How do we provide safe places for confession to happen?

Confession cannot and must not be forced. Yet finding a way to create a spirit of confession may be just what the Spirit is inviting so that we might experience transformation and reflect God's love far and wide. ⑩

*Mennonite Church USA biennial convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, July 6-10.

Licensing



Sarah Werner (left) was licensed toward ordination on June 14. She is a professor in the Pathways Theological Education Program of the United Church of Christ and is a lay leader at Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church. The service was held at Highbanks Metro Park in Columbus, and it was the first in-person service for the congregation since the beginning of the pandemic. Doug Luginbill (right), conference minister, led the licensing portion of the service.

Reflections by Sarah, “Embodiment in worship,” are on the Anabaptist Worship Network blog: <http://anabaptistworship.net/2021/03/embodiment-in-worship/>

Installation and licensing



Brian Moll was installed as pastor of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship and licensed toward recognition of his ordination in an online service on June 20. He was ordained about 25 years ago in the Independent Christian Church. Brian began his ministry with the Cincinnati congregation on June 1.

Financial report
June 30, 2021

Year-to-date contributed support	\$238,598
Year-to-date plan	\$230,413
Difference between giving and plan	+\$8,185
Year-to-date expenses	\$210,336
Year-to-date plan	\$237,887
Difference between expenses and plan	-\$27,551

This is the last report for the 2020-2021 financial year, though there may be a few minor adjustments to the final annual figures. Central District Conference gives thanks for another year in which contributions have exceeded budget and expenses have been lower than anticipated, as can be seen in the summary figures. As a result, there is a year-end surplus of about \$33,000.

We look forward to continuing to return to more normal operations in 2021-2022, and we are grateful to our member congregations and individual supporters for ensuring strong financial support throughout the pandemic.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

Central District Reporter
Volume 65, Number 4, July 2021
Editor: Mary E. Klassen
Email: cdceditor@gmail.com
Reporter is published six times a year. It is the official organ of communication among the churches of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. It is distributed free to CDC congregations through the CDC spending plan.

Central District Office:
Doug Luginbill, conference minister
Emma Hartman, administrator
1015 Division St., Goshen, IN 46528

Toll-free: 800.662.2264
Phone: 574.534.1485
Email: office@mcusacdc.org
Web: www.mcusacdc.org