



Scattered Seeds

August
2016

Annual Meeting 2016

Following Jesus--through the heat to the joy: Conference themes resound in worship and delegate sessions

by Holly Blosser Yoder

West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa

The joy of the
Lord is your
strength.

— Nehemiah 8:10

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"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." So the saying goes. But keynote speaker Leonard Dow, at the 16th Annual Meeting of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, told worshippers to expect something different, "I have found that it is at that point that God breaks in and waves of love and compassion and comfort come over me."

"When it's hot," Dow acknowledged, "we find ourselves with the desire to get out." Illustrating his sermons with examples from his church's ministry in Philadelphia, and making links to difficult denominational issues that leave members wounded and grieving, Dow's message illuminated the theme of "Joyfully Following Jesus," asking "What is Stealing our Joy?" and sharing about "Finding Joy in Unlikely Places."

"What seemed to be the end of ministry turned out to be the beginning. If I had left, I would have missed out on the joy of the Lord."

Relating a story of deep disappointment and a sense of failure in ministry followed by redemption and hope, Dow observed, "What seemed to be the end of ministry turned out to be the beginning," and added, "If I had left, I would have missed out on the joy of the Lord." The congregation at Oxford Circle Mennonite Church, where Dow serves as pastor, now offers ministries to children and to adults earning high school equivalency diplomas and learning English as a second language. In a multi-lingual, multi-cultural neighborhood, they host an annual festival that draws about 1,000 members of the community.

In interactive style, often calling for a response or inviting the congregation to finish a phrase, Dow drew listeners to engage personally and spiritually with the message, applying it to

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their own ministry contexts. These worship services started the day and informed the work that delegates did on a new “Covenant of Spiritual Practices” for Central Plains Mennonite Conference and other agendas in sessions Friday and Saturday.

In four days of fellowship, worship, business meetings and workshops, delegates and conference-goers

- approved a new covenant of spiritual practices for conference members;
- heard stories of transformation from across the conference, as well as relationships in Congo and Ecuador;
- welcomed ten new pastors credentialed this year, recognized new conference officers and committee members;
- grieved the loss of two congregations who chose to end their long relationship with the conference this year;
- learned more about Palestinian and Israeli partners in peacemaking through guest speaker Rev. Alex Awad of Bethlehem Bible College; and

- celebrated the presentation of the Peace Mug to Suzette Shreffler and Willis Busenitz for Everything Beautiful Thrift Shop in Lame Deer, Montana.

Hosted by local congregations Christ Community Church and Des Moines Mennonite Church at Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, the assembly met June 16-19, and ended with Sunday worship and communion at Temple B’nai Jeshurun, the meeting place of Christ Community Church.

Daily worship was held in the stained-glassed sanctuary of Luther Memorial Church, part of the complex of historic and contemporary buildings that make up the campus of the university, founded by Danish immigrants in 1896. Delegate sessions and meals were held in one location, in the Student Center, with booths from church agencies and classrooms for workshops nearby. Delegates were able to stay in dormitory housing, with children’s activities being held on campus.

Photos by Stan Harder



Listen to Leonard Dow’s sermons, see more photos and watch the highlight video on the Annual Meeting 2016 page at www.centralplainsmc.org.



Annual Meeting 2016

A new chapter opens...

by David Boshart
Executive Conference Minister



Annual Meeting 2016 was many things. It was joyful. It was rich. It was worshipful. It was historic. It was loving. Even as the church is buffeted with controversy and division, when we gather as Central Plains Mennonite Conference, we are reminded of the gift we are to one another in the body of Christ.

During our business session on Friday, delegates overwhelmingly adopted (89-90%), *Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference*. Diligent Mennonites that we are in Central Plains, some are concerned about what happens if we don't "do everything right." Some wonder exactly how this is all going to work. Here are some thoughts to help clarify the meaning of our decision.

We are "covenanting" not "contracting" with one another.

Covenant is God's preferred means for being in relationship with us. It follows that covenant would be the basis for how Christians relate to one another as the body of Christ. It is hard to overstate how indoctrinated we have become by contract-based relationships in America. Contracts have to do with self-protection and promoting self-interest, and exit strategies when relationships don't measure up to our expectations.

Covenants are different. Covenants are made in response to God's love expressed toward us. Covenants are made in trust that God's purposes are sure and will prevail even though we are not able to be perfect as God is perfect. Covenants are made trusting the best intentions of those with whom we covenant. When we fail to live up to our best intentions, we extend to one another the same grace that God extends to us.

The Covenant of Spiritual Practices is a vision of who we aspire to be as God's faithful people. It is not a checklist of things we do to satisfy requirements.

We have a tendency to jump past the primary vision of the covenant to analyze the specific behaviors that are called for in the six spiritual practices and the process of discernment. What if we can't do all that is described?

The most important part of this covenant is the open-

ing vision statement:

In response to God's unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The "doing" of these practices is not an end in itself. Everything that comes after this statement is intended to help us respond to God's love and place ourselves in a position to be transformed into the *likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit*. The six spiritual practices are not intended to be a checklist of things to do in order to "prove our sufficiency." These are six ways that we submit ourselves to the purposes of God; six ways we give ourselves wholly to God's transforming grace. If we find out that these practices aren't helping us in this transformation, we will need to discern other practices. But we will continue to seek the power of God's transforming love working among us. Covenant making involves declarations and signs. We are seeking a sign (or signs) of the covenant that will keep us focused on this central vision.

The covenant sets a course for the long journey toward transformation.

After two years of considering and revising this covenant, the action to adopt the covenant may have felt a bit anti-climatic. Nevertheless, in adopting the covenant, we have committed ourselves to a new way of being church together. As with all covenants, living it out will be a long journey of keeping the vision in focus, making adjustments, contextualizing our spiritual practices, negotiating disagreements, experimenting, and walking by *faith and in trust* as we respond to God's unqualified love for us *together*.

I have no illusions that this covenant we are making will be perfect and trouble free. I have no illusions that the covenant will resolve our disagreements around sexuality. But I do believe that when we join together in things that make us more available to the Holy Spirit and to one another we will see transformation. We will grow in faithfulness and in God's mission. As we strengthen what binds us together, it will become obvious why it is better to be together than give in to divisive disagreement. I can't wait to see what God will do with a people who respond to God's unqualified love by covenanting together in this way.



Annual Meeting 2016

A delegate reports to his congregation

by Marcus Miller

Kalona Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa

Here's what one delegate reported to his congregation about the adoption of the Covenant of Spiritual Practices at Annual Meeting 2016.

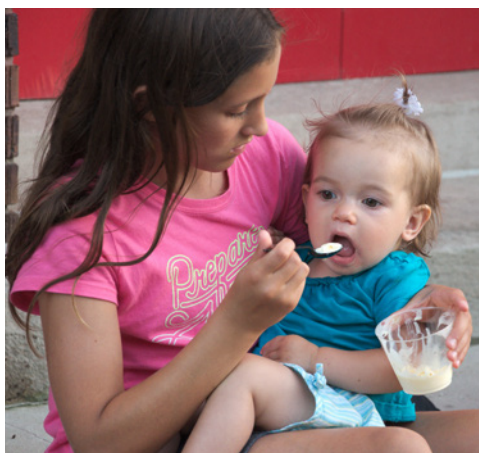
Friday afternoon the delegates reviewed and approved by an overwhelming majority *A Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference*. In reviewing the development of the covenant, David Boshart emphasized the difference between a contract and a covenant. Boshart used the example of a marriage to try and explain. When we are young and in love, we make a decision to get married. We may be naive and slightly out of touch with reality, but we understand the basics of a marriage commitment. At the same time there is no way we can fully know what all we may face in our future life together. It is the commitment to faithfulness from the beginning that sustains this relationship no matter what comes in the future. Boshart described the proposed covenant in much the same way. As congregations in Central Plains Mennonite Conference we would be committing ourselves to do the work necessary to make our “marriage” to each other work and succeed in the face of an unknown future.

The discussion then moved to table groups of 7 to 8 people. Based on the noise level, there was good discussion taking place at all the tables. Group members asked questions and reflected on their own and their congregation's experience. My group included a youth delegate whose insights as a young adult were valuable and a pastor who provided a pastoral perspective.

Time was given for additional questions which came up during the table group discussions. After some time, delegates were asked to raise one of three slips of paper. “Green” meant we were comfortable proceeding to a vote, “yellow” signified slow down, and “red” meant we were not ready to vote. When delegates were asked to raise their papers, the room was filled with green, mixed in with a few yellows and one red. Based on these results a vote was held. This time we were asked to raise either a green card or a red card signifying our support or opposition to the covenant. The covenant was adopted by a vote of 112 with one abstention. (89.5%)

After the vote some delegates, even those who voted for it, spoke of their concerns about their congregation's ability to implement all aspects of the covenant. Once again Boshart reminded us of the difference between a covenant and a contract. The covenant approach reflects a spirit of grace. Grace is something not found in most contracts which emphasize the crossing of the “t's and the dotting of the i's.” It reminds me of signing the papers to buy our house. Grace is not part of the mortgage equation. Grace is a necessary part of a marriage equation.

With the adoption of *A Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference*, the responsibility shifts to the local congregations and to us. We have committed ourselves to six “common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.” We may do some of these well, some we may struggle to implement. Other congregations may do one thing well and struggle with the rest; but in voting for the document, we indicated our willingness to stand with other congregations in good times and in bad, in our brokenness and our failures, in times of celebration and growth. In the act of committing ourselves to the covenant, there is hope and faith that the lives of people in the congregations and the conference will begin to transform “as we grow in holistic witness to God's reconciling mission in the world” (from the Central Plains mission statement).



Annual Meeting 2016

Central Plains children have it “in the bag”

by Esther Streed

Des Moines Mennonite Church

Coordinator, Annual Meeting Children's Activities

A wonderfully delightful group of 36 children attended children's activities at Annual Meeting 2016. The 24 school-aged children focused on creating and then delivering items to the Care Bag program in Newton, Iowa. They gathered items, tied blankets, and made cards of joy to include in bags that are distributed to displaced, abused and disadvantaged children worldwide. On Saturday they delivered a vehicle full of supplies, learned about the Care Bag Foundation from its founder and helped prepare some bags for distribution.

On Friday afternoon the school-age children, accompanied by the four-year-olds, visited Iowa's Living History Farms. In spite of a muggy, hot afternoon with lots of walking, our children were complimented numerous times for their manners, positive behaviors, and general consideration of other people. They learned about the settlement of the Midwest and the changes in farming over 300 years by visiting working exhibits.

For these children, Annual Meeting ended with each school-aged student writing on a cross a word that described for them the two days. They were then told that the same word defines the God who loves them and the person they can become by following His ways.

Super thanks to Kristen Leichty and her team for creating a safe, fun environment for the preschoolers and to the volunteers who helped each day.



Youth “escape” for a weekend—and God met them there

by Shana Peachey Boshart
Conference Minister for Christian Formation

Let there be no doubt—God is alive and God cares about youth! This is my testimony after planning and enjoying Youth Escape 2016. Many people come from various settings and roles in order to make Youth Escape happen—and all of them came together smoothly. Many details need to come together, from food to breakout leaders to a properly inflated blob—and they all did. Even the weather was perfect!

The theme, Inside Out, was chosen because the youth leaders planning the retreat saw the need to share with youth that God has made them unique, beloved children of God; and that their value transcends their reputation, their possessions or their power. Michele Hershberger, Bible professor at Hesston College, brought this message home in three sermons characterized by her unique blend of excellent scripture interpretation and compelling theater.

Hershberger opened the weekend on Friday evening with a sketch of the parable of the pearl of great price, then gave each participant a pearl with the message, “You are God’s precious pearl.”

Lynn Stoneking, a member of Bethel Mennonite Church in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, led music, getting youth to sing, clap, jump and do other motions to a variety of worship songs and a few of her own compositions.

Besides four worship sessions, the youth attended two breakout sessions and had plenty of opportunity to mix, play and enjoy a wide variety of camp activities. Saturday night, everyone played a night game based on “capture the flag.”

Youth and sponsors were enthusiastic in their evaluations of the weekend, rating the worship and small group discussions just as high as the fun activities. One sponsor called the weekend a perfect balance of fun and serious. Several sponsors reported that kids opened up and had deeper discussions than usual.

We plan Youth Escape every two years, believing that God honors our efforts to open a space in which youth can encounter God in new and deeper ways. And that is just what happened—thanks be to God!

Many thanks to the planning committee: John Murray (chair) of Third Way Church, Alejandra Huesca of Iglesia El Balsamo, Josh Lundberg of Kalona Mennonite, Taric Leichty of Bellwood, Ben Ramirez of Milford Mennonite, Carly Unruh of Wayland Mennonite, Monica Clem of Hutterthal, Maggie Wiebe of Emmanuel and Tim Bender of West Union.

Transitions

Alberto Parchmont resigned as pastor at Templo Alabanza in Moline, Illinois, effective June 16, 2016.

Leaders Credentialed

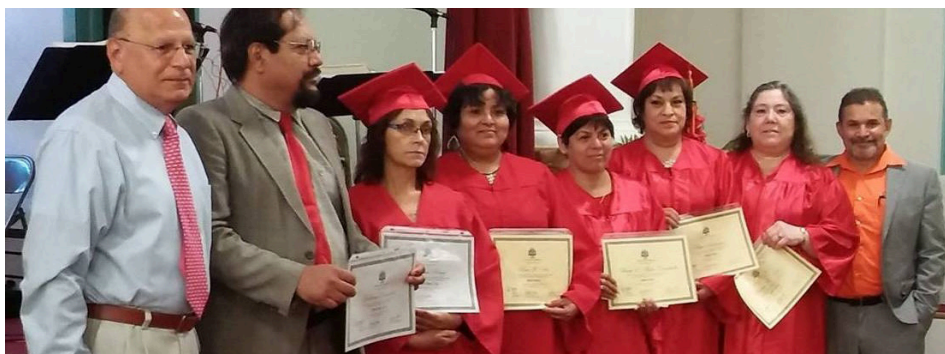
Joshua Lundberg was licensed toward ordination on February 28, 2016, at Kalona Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa.

Michael Miller Swartzendruber was installed and licensed toward ordination on May 8, 2016, as co-pastor at Wayland Mennonite Church, Wayland, Iowa.



IBA Graduation

Six students, pictured below, graduated from Instituto Biblico Anabautista ("IBA" or Anabaptist Bible Institute) at Templo Alabanza in Moline, Illinois, the first weekend of June. Guillermo Domínguez and Carmen Raya earned certificates, and Rosa Solís, Margie Mejia Caraballo, Felipa (Lipi) Domínguez, and Mona Mejía earned diplomas. IBA director Marco Guete (first from left) from Mennonite Education Agency was present to award the graduates. He shared a message on the call, responsibility and commitment to the Lord and his church. Pictured on the right is pastor Alberto Parchmont. Congratulations to the sisters and brother for working hard and persisting to meet the requirements for graduation. —Ramiro Hernandez, Hispanic Ministries Coordinator



Annual Leaders Retreat

More than fifty pastors, chaplains and spouses gathered at St. Benedict Center, Schuyler, Nebraska April 22-24 for the Annual Leaders Retreat. The resource speaker this year was Deb Hirsch, author of *Redeeming Sex* and co-author with husband Alan Hirsch of *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*. The worship sessions focused on four different ways of approaching Scripture: reading, seeing, hearing, and singing the text. The retreat was a wonderful mix of worship, learning, relationship building, and rest.

The Pastoral Leadership Committee encourages congregations to release their pastors for this important retreat. The Annual Leaders Retreat will be held March 19-21 in 2017. —Lois Janzen Preheim

The Amazon calls!

Do you want to make 2017 a memorable year? Make plans now to join the January 7-19, 2017, Ecuador Partnership Learning and Fellowship Tour. Like previous learning tours, we will visit Mennonite Churches in Quito to see first-hand their work with Colombian refugees and their community peace-making activities. New to this trip is a visit to the Amazon rain forest, where we'll meet indigenous Christians and experience one of the most diverse ecosystems on earth! Encourage your congregation to send a representative to build a stronger relationship with our brothers and sisters in Ecuador! Contact Joetta Schlabach (jschlabach@faithmennonite.org / 651-290-2185) with questions or to reserve a spot. Find information at www.centralplainsmc.org under Ecuador Partnership. —Joetta Schlabach

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Scattered Seeds August 2016

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FINANCES

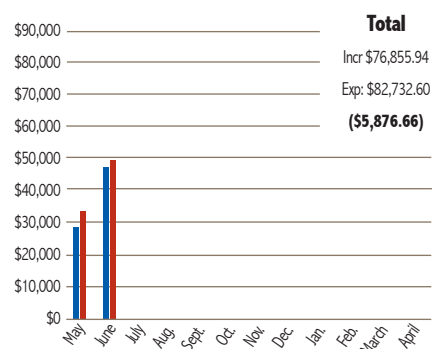
Two months into the fiscal year, the Central Plains budget shows a deficit, but much less of one than in recent years. Income for May and June came in at \$76,855.94, helped by Annual Meeting registrations and offerings received. Expenses for the two months came in at \$82,732.60, which includes the cost of Annual Meeting. As a result, we are at a deficit for the fiscal year of \$5,876.66. We are thankful for the continued support of our conference and continue to see God's work in many different ways.

— *Stewardship Task Group*

Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Income (blue) vs. Expenses (red)

Fiscal Year 2016/2017



UPCOMING EVENTS

Conference Board and Council of Committees will meet August 26-27, in Kalona, Iowa.

Ecuador Partnership Learning and Fellowship Tour will take place January 7-19, 2017.

Central Plains Annual Meeting 2017 will take place June 15-18, 2017, in South Dakota.

Mennonite Church USA Convention & Delegate Assembly will take place
July 4-8, 2017 in Orlando, Florida.



*Growing in holistic witness to God's reconciling mission
in the world through fellowship, discipleship and leadership.*