



Central
District
Conference

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

focus

KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE
ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

FEBRUARY 2016

Faith Mennonite, Goshen, hosts regional conference gathering

By Mary E. Klassen

One participant in the Goshen, Ind., regional gathering for Central District Conference, on Sat., Feb 20, said that of all the conferences she attends, this was more focused on relationships than any other.

The purpose of the three February and March regional meetings is for people in the conference to get acquainted with each other and with the work of the conference. The first activity was for participants to learn to know one other person and to create a pipe cleaner symbol that represents something about that person. In the final session participants joined in triads where they prayed for their three congregations.

In between was singing, Dwelling in the Word, presentations, reports of conference news and ac-



Mary Ellen Meyer sings during the opening music at the Central District regional gathering at Faith Mennonite Church, Goshen Ind., Feb. 20, 2016. (Photo by J. Tyler Klassen)

tivities, and a vignette from CDC history. The afternoon also included two break-out options: a report on the "Come and See Tour" to Isreal-Palestine in which several CDC pastors participated, and learning about and sampling a human sexuality study guide commissioned by the conference.

Annual theme explored in Scripture

"Abounding in love, abiding in grace"—the theme for CDC this year—opened and closed the day as participants sang "The Lord lift you up," a hymn written by Patty Shelly. Dwelling in the Word focused on Jonah 4, when God reminds Jonah that the people (and animals) of Nineveh are worthy of God's abounding, steadfast love.

Faith Mennonite Church: Living our theology

As the hosts for the Feb 20 gathering, Faith Mennonite Church had an opportunity to tell the story of their congregation. "We do our theology by living it," Deron Brill Bergstresser, one of the pastors, said.



Participants looked over the "Human Sexuality: A Biblical Perspective Study Guide Preview" during the breakout session lead by Carrie Mast and Gerald Mast of First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, Ohio. The session was a test of the study guide on the Bible and human sexuality that will be tested further at future CDC gathering. (Photo by J. Tyler Klassen)

CDC regional gathering, *continued*

One form this takes is a shared meal every Sunday evening as a way to welcome people and to remember Jesus and trust that Jesus is present among them around the tables. Including people who do not feel at home in a traditional congregation means that they have welcomed members with varied income, educational level, abilities, religious experiences and gender identities. Carl Yoder, member of the congregation and member of the CDC stewardship committee, said, “When you learn other peoples’ story, it becomes part of your story and you change.”

Reports from the conference and MC USA

Lois Johns Kaufmann, conference minister, reported on several significant issues coming in the near future:

1. A recent grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc., to Mennonite Church USA will help pastors who face financial needs. Everence in Goshen, Ind., will manage the funds, which are intended for providing both financial education and assistance for pastors. Anyone wanting information may contact Lois Johns Kaufmann.

2. In 2015, CDC credentialed a pastor who is in a covenanted, same-sex relationship. As a result, the conference is seen as being at variance with denominational guidelines. The Constituency Leaders Council of MC USA is developing a plan for a peer review, which will involve CDC leaders and other conference leaders; the shape of this is still to be determined.

Historical vignette

Perry Bush, conference historian and professor at Bluffton (Ohio) University, recently published a biography of C. Henry Smith, an influential Mennonite historian in the 1900s. Drawing from this work, Perry crafted a message from Smith to the conference today. At the Goshen gathering, Paul Keim, Goshen College professor, assumed Smith’s persona to share that message, including this call: “The great need today among Mennonites is not so much a unanimity of belief and practice in all detail, as a spirit of cooperation in carrying out a great constructive program of church activities, which no group by itself is able to achieve. There is so much good we can accomplish together.”

Testing human sexuality study guide

One of two afternoon options for participants was an introduction to a study guide on biblical per-



Maureen Lancaster, right, from Madison Mennonite introducing Tim Schrag with her pipe cleaner creation. (Photo by Emma Hartman)

spectives of human sexuality, commissioned by the conference. Gerald and Carrie Mast of Bluffton are developing the guide, using a more academic study completed last year by a conference committee.

This guide is intended for Christian education classes or other groups who want to take a fresh look at sexuality through the lens of Scripture. Gerald and Carrie will continue to test this study guide, including further conversations about it at the annual gathering in June.

The Feb 20 gathering, hosted by Faith Mennonite Church, was the second of three regional meetings scheduled in February and March. The first was Feb. 13 at Community Mennonite Church, Markham, Ill., and the third will be hosted by Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, Berne, Ind., on March 5.

While these gatherings do not address official business, they do contribute to the larger work of the conference. As participants learn to know each other and what is happening across the conference—from Florida and Georgia to Michigan, from Iowa and Wisconsin to Ohio—they are strengthening the conference for its ministries and for what Lois called “relational accountability”—putting emphasis on being in relationships.