ASSSEMBLY 2015

*“BUILT INTO A SPIRITUAL HOUSE”*

**MINUTES FROM DELEGATE SESSION**

June 11-13 2015

Harrisonburg Mennonite Church

1. **Call to Order**. Elroy Miller, moderator, called the summer delegate session of congregational and credentialed delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) to order on June 11, 2015, at 9:12 a.m. 125 delegates signed in; including observers, the total number of registrants was 240.
2. **Missional Story.** Lizzette Hernandez shared about her work with IBA (Anabaptist Biblical Institute) and the challenges, including learning a new language, which students face.
3. **Announcements.** Kevin Gasser, assistant moderator, provided the rationale behind this year’s theme, “Built into a Spiritual House,” and asked delegates from each district to stand as called.
4. **Minutes.** Edith Kuhns Shenk, secretary, shared actions taken by Conference Council since Winter Session in February, and highlights from the minutes of Winter Delegate Session.

**ACTION. The minutes from the February 7, 2015, were approved as written. PASSED**

1. **Executive Conference Minister’s Report.** Clyde G. Kratz, Executive Conference Minister, reported on his work over the past year.
* **Newsletter Changes.** Clyde reportedon publication changes for the newsletter “Connections”. This newsletter will be published as a one-page prayer calendar with announcements for both VMMissions and VMConference on the reverse side. In addition two additional newsletters will be published: “Pathways” is the name of the new VMC quarterly newsletter, and “Transforming” is the name for the new VMMissions newsletter. The first issue of “Pathways’ has gone to print, and contains missional stories from at least four districts.
* **Statistics.** Clyde summarized and highlighted the affirmations and challenges evidenced in the conference membership statistics (VMC Report and Statistics 2014-2015, page 19).

Clyde commendedcongregations for their discipleship making efforts: 81 baptisms, 56 letters of transfers, and 93 confessions of faith. He also commended those exercising transparency by cleaning up inactive rolls: a conference wide loss of 504 (44 deaths). VMC’s net loss of members was 248, and worship attendance was down by 384.

He challenged the 20 congregations who did not report to do so next year. The statics help assess trends and challenges, necessary information for effective strategic planning.

The statistics reported also indicate a reason for cautious celebration and careful strategic planning. Clyde reported seven congregations in formation (CIFs). Because these congregations are in formation, only their worship attendance (161) was included. Clyde noted also that 27 congregations have fewer than 50 members; all together those congregations have 650 members. Statistics indicate that 70% of all church plants (congregations in formation) fail and congregations with fewer than 50 members have limited potential for a sustainable future.

The youth census also reveals concerns. The potential for the years 2015-2020 is 509, but for 2020-25 the numbers drop to 316, a decrease of 200. The actual disciple making impact of that drop should include not only the 200 fewer youth, but also their potential spouses and 1.7 children, spouses and children who will be not be discipled within VMC.

* **Revenue generation & donor relations.** During the months of June to August, Clyde will be sharing financial information and priorities, and building relationships with donors.

**Generative Question:** What does your congregation need from VMC to assist you in “making disciples”? As you think about youth and young adult culture—what does your congregation need from VMC to assist you in reaching youth and young adults. Table groups reported the following:

* The importance of reaching our youth is high.
* Local events and conference events sometimes conflict.
* We need to engage in the ways young people engage, including chat rooms, Facebook, and other social media.
* Older adults need to step back and let youth rewrite congregational visions.
* What about a junior delegate program allowing training opportunities for youth and young adults?
* Perhaps education is needed on what it means to make disciples.

**Missional Story.** Rich Early, pastor at Grace Mennonite Fellowship, shared how “redneck Mennos” build relationships, the foundation for Grace Mennonite’s discipleship making efforts.An example was a relational issue that arose when the board of elders decided to move to two services. Those newer church members protested, “We will lose the family we never had” before becoming part of Grace. By giving up the desire to “be right”, and putting relationships and transparency first, the matter resolved and remained healthy. For one member who still disagrees with the decision of maintaining two services, “I am going to stay with the church; right or wrong, I made a commitment and I’m staying.”

1. **Gifts Discernment Committee.** Mim Mumaw, chair of the gifts discernment committee, asked delegates to complete the ballots placed in the delegate packets, and the emailed survey seeking people the Gifts Discernment Committee may consider when filling vacancies.
2. **Faith & Life Commission.** Judith Trumbo, chair of the Faith and Life Commission (FLC), informed delegates that FLC focuses on leadership around doctrinal matters and spiritual life, spiritual events, and pastoral support. FLC members have spent a considerable amount of time working on the same gender issue; the Committee affirmed the resolution on membership. She asked delegates to jot down answers to the generative question: “Please list one affirmation and one recommendation for FLC.”
3. **Finance Committee.** Committee member Ed Yoder, CPA with PB Mares, reported on behalf of the finance committee. VMC is lagging below projections: individual giving is 50% below, and congregational giving is 11% behind. Expenses are outpacing income by $34,000.The projected deficit, if trends continue, will be about $15,000. VMC needs an increase in giving from both individuals and congregations.
4. **Congregational Life Commission.** Peggy Brubaker, Congregational Life Commission (CLC), reported on behalf of that committee. CLC selected the wide variety of workshops being presented this weekend. Ideas for future workshops are encouraged and can be listed on the Assembly survey.
5. **Conference Council Report.** Elroy reported on behalf of Conference Council. Conference Council has worked hard to maintain unity among difference, to keep mission and vision, and relationships front and center, and to trust the process of conversation and discernment.

**Recess.** Session recessed at 11:50 for lunch and resumed at 12:58 a.m.

1. **Mara Congregation of Charlotte.** Dan Yoder informed delegates that the Mara Chin congregation (25 families, and about 70 20-40 year old worshippers) are refugees from Burma. Shortly after arrival in the states, a leader’s family was in a car accident. Everence matched financial donations raised by the Mara people and in the TCK District, and assisted the family with a total of $5,000, which tightened their bond with the Mennonite Church. Though the connection between the Mara church and VMC appears to be more of a relational connection than a theological connection (Anabaptist theology is very new to them), the Tennessee, Kentucky, Carolina District (TCK District) recommended to Conference Council that the Mara Christian Church of Charlotte be approved as a full member of VMC. Conference Council has approved that recommendation, and now requests approval of that recommendation.

**ACTION. On motion, Conference Council recommends to Delegate Session that the Mara Christian Church of Charlotte, upon the recommendation from the TCK District, be approved as a full congregation. PASSED**

1. **Peace Committee.** Spencer Bradford, co-chair, reported for the Peace Committee. He handed out forms for registering as a conscientious objector.
2. **Report from MC USA.** Terry Shue, director of leadership development for MC USA**,** handed out two documents: “WeAreMenno,” a brief outline of the diversity present in MC USA, and “Mennonite Church USA: An Overview.”

Ervin Stutzman, director of MC USA, updated delegates on MC USA’s vision and goals, and updated participants on preparations for MC USA. David Brubaker, a faculty member of Eastern Mennonite University’s community for justice and peace building program, and Larry Houter (a member of the executive board) are preparing Convention planners for guiding the discussion groups.

The resolutions on membership and forebearance are two resolutions coming before MC USA Convention delegates; Ervin stated that the diversity represented in the “We Are Menno” handout reflects also the diversity of opinion on those issues related to the same gender conversations.

Also to be considered are the Endless War resolution, the Kairos resolution addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a churchwide statement on sexual abuse. At Convention, MC USA will receive an offering to care for women who have suffered at the hands of a religious leader, and on Friday evening there will be a worship service of Lament and Hope for Victims of Sexual Abuse.

Ervin noted that Mennos have a martyr history because of our strong value on being right (our longstanding history as conscientious objectors is one example), but we also have a strong history of relationship. When those two values clash,

we have the issues we are dealing with today. He asked VMC delegates discuss

the following questions:

* Where area conferences with their congregations are committed to seek God’s wisdom on the balance between freedom (the freedom to seek God’s wisdom and discernment in the church, or autonomy) and mutual accountability, how do you keep freedom and autonomy in a healthy balance as we follow Jesus together?
* What would you at your table like to say to or ask MC USA? When the question was raised about potential contradictions between MC USA and VMC polity, Ervin stated that VMC polity will override because of Conference rules. He noted, too, that Mennonite congregations are becoming a high class church. One reason is the way we do business. For example, the timing and the cost of Convention excludes those who are five-day a week wage earners without the resources to cover the high costs of fees and lost work days.
1. **Ballot Results.** Mim reported for Gifts Appointments Committee. Of the 104 ballots received, there was strong affirmation for all five persons listed on the ballot.
* Kevin Gasser was reappointed as assistant moderator (term: September 1, 2015 – August 31, 2018).
* Brenda North Martin was reappointed as a member of the EMU Constitutional Committee moderator (term: September 1, 2015 – August 31, 2018).
* Pearl Hartman was reappointed as a member-at-large of Faith & Life Commission moderator (term: September 1, 2015 – August 31, 2018).

Though VMMissions Bylaws do not specify the need to seek affirmation from VMC’s delegate body for at-large members, they like to honor that practice as long as VMC’s Bylaws request it. Reuben Horst and Mary Thiessen nation were affirmed as at-large members of VMMissions.

1. **History Report.** Timothy Jost, chair of the historical committee, read from Hebrews 12, “therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses….”

Steve Nolt will begin work on the history book in 2016. The committee has raised $20,403.95, or 1/3 of the goal of $60,000. This project is a joint effort of the Shendoah Valley Mennonite Historians and Virginia Conference Historical Committee.

Both funding and records are needed for the archives. Fewer than half of VMC congregations are sending documents; a greater percentage of former congregations are still sending documents. The committee members encourage a “fuller picture of our cloud of witnesses.” Options are also being considered for the problem of inadequate space.

GAMEO is a valuable research tool for Mennos and nonMennos. He asked that the several congregations who have not yet updated their entries do so.

**Missional Story.** Wade Seukeran, pastor ofDiego Martin Church, brought greetings from

 the Mennonite Conference of Trinidad & Tabago (MCTT). In that area, out of fear of contagion, those who suffered from Hanson’s Disease were, in the past, shunned and marginalized. When Richard Keeler came to MCTT as a missionary, those with Hanson’s Disease were being reintegrated into society. In one instance a group of people least expected to be prayer warriors for healing, silently prayed for a man who was healed of cancer. During surgery afterward, no evidence of cancer was found.

Wade also shared the story of a wake where half of the attendees were in an alcohol free home and the other half were enjoying alcohol on the other side of the street. Yet both sides were equally celebratory as they shared about the deceased, and with each other.

Quoting Michael Frost, Wade said, “It’s an army that God has called to announce and demonstrate the reign of Jesus Christ but without being something we are not…I am glad God saved me, a gambler, who is just as sinful as the gay.”

**Time of Prayer.** Delegates and observers huddled in small groups for a time of prayer. Craig Maven, pastor of HMC, closed in prayer and also asked for a blessing on the evening meal.

**Recess.** Delegates dismissed at 3:35 to attend afternoon workshops; Session resumed on Saturday, June 13 at 9:13 a.m.

**Introductions:** Elroy introduced and recognized Josh Byler, from MennoMedia, James Miller, representing the Corinthian Plan, Pamela Miller representing Pleasant View, Loren Swartzendruber, president of EMU, Phil Helmuth at EMU, and Joyce Lind, a representative of the Family Life Resource Center.

**Missional Story**. Seth Crissman, co-leader with his wife, Theresa, of Kids Clubs, shared that at one Kids Club gathering, children took on various roles of a New Testament story. Amina, speaks Arabic at home and is learning English, chose the role of the Holy Spirit. She didn’t need to speak English well to blow the breath of the spirit onto the prophets, Jesus, and the disciples. Besides skit production, at Kids Clubs, Seth and

Teresa share a Bible story and food. The Kids Clubs they lead reflect the flavor of the kids and the Community. The Crissmans are TranSenders through VMMissions.

1. **VMMissions Report.** Phyllis Miller, VMMissions board chair, provided an overview of VMMissions.

PresidentAaron Kauffman highlighted TranSend’s tenth anniversary. This year VMMissions has renewed its emphasis on home missions through The Doorway into Missions program. Seth and Teresa are the first long-term home missionaries in some time, and two more are in process. VMMissions is seeking discipleship opportunities in the United States, and delegates were encouraged to talk with Clyde about possibilities. International missions remain a strong focus; VMMissions will send four families overseas this year. Aaron asked delegates to help their congregations navigate the Conference and VMMissions newsletter changes Clyde reported earlier.

Aaron also reported on staffing changes: VMMissions director of advancement Sherah-Leigh Gerber has accepted a position at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church, and a replacement for her position is sought. Dianna Lehman has been hired as the administrative manager, replacing Lois Mast who retired earlier this year.

Ken Horst has worked hard in donor relations, and VMMissions has had their best year financially in the last five years.

Sherah-Leigh announced that the annual Taste of Missions will be in July. Information on that event will be coming soon.

The Mission Coordinator program is being reinstated (see handout).

VMMissions ended their report with an informational video, created by Clay Showalter, on the TranSend program, and then asked table groups to discuss “What one thing could VMMissions do to help you bring mission alive in your congregation.”

1. **Listening Committee.** Lyubov Slashcheva reported for the listening committee; their written report is attached.
2. **Meeting Adjourned.** Aaron offered a closing prayer, Delegate session closed by singing “God be With You Till Meet Again.” The 2015 Summer Delegate Session adjourned at 11:26 a.m. on Saturday, June 13, 2015.

Respectfully submitted,

Edith Shenk-Kuhns,

Secretary