

“Neighbors: Strangers No More”
Virginia Mennonite Conference Summer Delegate Session
Minutes
July 20-22, 2017
Park View Mennonite Church

1. **Gathering & Introductions.** After Bible study led by Old Testament Professor Wilma Bailey on the book of Ruth, Moderator Elroy Miller welcomed observers and delegates to the 106th Annual VMC Assembly and Summer 2017 Delegate Session at 9:30 a.m. The quorum requirement of 78 delegates was met, as 121 delegates registered their attendance on sign-in sheets provided at each table.
2. **Announcements & introduction of Listening Committee.** Kevin Gasser, assistant moderator, introduced the assembly theme—“Neighbors: Strangers No More”. Kevin also introduced the 2017 listening committee members: Johnnie Gnanamanickam, delegate representing Mt. Pleasant Mennonite; Moriah Hurst, pastor at Park View Mennonite Church; Carl Mericle, district minister of Eastern District and pastor at Providence Mennonite Church; and MaryBeth Heatwole Moore, pastor of Signs of Life.
3. **Minutes.** Secretary Edith Kuhns reviewed highlights from Conference Council actions taken since Winter Delegate Session 2017 in February and from the minutes of the Winter 2017 Delegate Session.

ACTION. The minutes from the 2017 Winter Delegate Session are approved with the title of the Confession changed to *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (page 5, section 8: Resolutions, petition, and correspondence)*.

4. **Introduction of Guests.** Clyde Kratz, executive conference minister, introduced fraternal guests and those representing conference related ministries.
5. **Report from Executive Conference Minister.** Clyde, provided highlights from and updates to his written report (*2016-2017 Reports & Statistics, pages 3 & 4*), and provided a copy of a July 17, 2017 news release outlining progress made on recommendations from MC USA based on the D. Stafford & Associates report.

That DSA report contains the findings from the investigation of responses to the Luke Hartman matter. Actions taken: 1) Lonnie Yoder and Teresa Boshart Yoder, FaithTrust certified trainers, have trained VMC’s Ministry Investigative Team and Faith & Life Commission members; 2) The fall and spring schedule of district and cluster training on *Healthy Boundaries: Fundamentals* is nearly complete; more information will follow. 3) VMC’s Ministry Investigative Team has received complaints from both Clyde and Northern District Minister Aldine Musser, and has begun their work.

Clyde, Southern District Minister Beryl Jantzi, and Southern District Chair & Assistant Minister Kevin Gasser will conduct Anabaptist leadership training in Jamaica in August,

and FLC secretary H. Michael "Mike" Shenk III is attending the Mennonite Conference of Trinidad and Tobago. Clyde is also planning a sabbatical from October 1, 2017 through January 1, 2018; the Faith & Life Commission and Conference Council will act on the final plans for that sabbatical in August and September.

Delegates, invited to bring questions, asked about structures, policies and practices VMC will be put in place going forward that would prevent a pastor with a past misconduct file from being hired without the whole search committee knowing that information, or from serving without his or her oversight leaders being fully informed about the past misconduct and providing appropriate oversight and accountability. Clyde noted that MC USA may request that conferences report misconduct; however, MC USA does not have the authority to mandate reporting.

Several led in prayer for Clyde.

6. **Faith & Life Commission Report.** Patsy Seitz, chair of FLC, presented plaques to retiring cluster leaders Carl Smeltzer, leader of the chaplains cluster, and Gordon Zook, leader of the administrative/leadership cluster.

VMMissional Story: Taryn Zander, serving with Global Refugee Short-term Missions and a JMU graduate, reported on her involvement in the local refugee crisis. The world is experiencing the largest refugee crisis in modern history: 2.5 million persons are refugees (the population of Texas) and half of those are less than 18 years old; the average amount of time spent in a refugee camp is ten years.

7. **Report from VMC moderator.** Moderator Elroy Miller produced a handout explaining Conference Council's rationale for tabling resolutions presented at Winter 2017 Delegate Session, and provided Council's recommended revisions (see attached).

ACTION. On motion delegates voted to take the Vision and Mission statement discussion, tabled in February, off the table. APPROVED

ACTION. On motion delegates approved the adoption of MC USA's Vision Statement as our own:

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace, so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world. APPROVED

ACTION. Though, by raising hands, a small majority of delegates approved Conference Council's recommended Mission Statement, a revised statement will

be placed on the agenda for the September meeting of Conference Council, and on the February 2018 agenda of delegate session. To create greater overall ownership of the statement, upon the recommendation of MC USA Executive Director Ervin Stutzman, Council will also recommend the percentage of affirmations to be reached before a new mission statement is deemed approved.
TABLED

8. **Treasurer's Report:** Krista Powell, member of VMC Finance Committee, presented a financial report and noted that without a large estate gift we would be behind on our financial goals.
9. **Report from Gifts Discernment Committee.** Phyllis Martin, a member of the Gifts Discernment Committee, reported and presented the Summer 2017 ballot (attached).

LUNCH. At noon delegates recessed for lunch provided by food trucks and neighboring restaurants. Delegate Session resumed at 1 p.m. with Craig Maven leading in singing "I Owe the Lord a Morning Song".

10. **Report from Historical Committee.** Historical Committee Chair Tim Jost honored retired archivist Harold Huber, for whom a plaque was also prepared.

Steven Nolt reported that he has begun research for the historical book, and detailed several possible beginnings for Virginia Mennonite Conference: Dry Fork, West Virginia; Tennessee; the work Leslie W. Francisco II began in Hampton, Virginia; or even medical doctor Richard Keeler's work with lepers in Trinidad. "There is no single starting point for church history," Keeler said. It is only as we connect the stories of relationship building that we begin to see God's love for the world in our history.

11. **Report from Polity Task Force.** Ryan Ahlgrim and Nancy Heisey, members of the Polity Task Force, reported on their work. The Task Force is looking at the question of where authority lies. To answer the question, members are reviewing both structure and authority. The Task Force plans to complete their work by and report at Winter Delegate Session 2018 in February.

Questions and comments from the floor.

- Is there a way to offer immediate protection for a victim without victimizing the accused who is considered innocent until proven guilty?
- MC USA struggles to achieve a 50% attendance rate and diversity at the biennial Convention. VMC today, however, is represented by almost 65% of its members. Even so it would be better if we could hear from all quadrants.
- VMC needs more young people.

- Does the survey accurately reflect the whole of VMC? Who were the silent ones? What groups were the most vocal?

12. Recommendation from Conference Council: During the Thursday evening Assembly 2017 worship service, MaryBeth Heatwole Moore shared testimonies from Signs of Life, a deaf congregation-in-formation that meets in Staunton, Virginia. MaryBeth also shared the common experiences the deaf face as they navigate a hearing world, experiences that often destroy their self-esteem and sense of worth. MaryBeth provided the congregation's history, and Conference Council's and Southern District's recommendation to bring Signs of Life into full membership.

ACTION. On motion Signs of Life, a congregation-in-formation within Southern District, is approved for full membership with all the rights and privileges thereof.

APPROVED

Delegates affirmed this action with loud applause following the vote.

13. Results of Gifts Discernment Committee Ballot. Phyllis reported that Elroy Miller is approved as moderator for a second three-year term, September 1, 2017 to August 31, 2020.

Delegates also affirmed Art McPhee and Reuben Horst as members of the VM Missions Board of Directors. Art is a retired professor of missions who taught at Asbury Theological Seminary at AMBS. Reuben is lead pastor at New Beginnings, a non-VMC congregation.

14. Report from MC USA. Ervin Stutzman, executive director of MC USA, reported from "Love is a Verb," MC USA Convention 2017 in Orlando. Ten international guests attended, and two VMC pastors held leading roles: Seth Crissman led the Youth Convention and Phil Kniss was a featured speaker.

New this year was the future church summit, a large group process designed for high participation. The Step Up program, which allowed youth to be present as delegates, was also new this year. More college-aged persons were able to attend as well.

MC USA is undergoing a leadership shift. Three area conferences who had attended the past two Conventions were absent. Five universities in two years will have new presidents, and 50% of conference ministers have changed. Whether or not this is a generational shift remains to be seen. This shift changed the feel of Convention. Some felt they had a greater voice. Some cheered. Others said "this is not the church I want to be a part of".

Conferences, too, are experiencing a shift as congregations move from one conference to another. In horse and buggy days, distance mattered. Congregations, therefore, aligned with nearby conferences, a geographical affiliation. That is changing as congregations seek affiliation based on similar theology, polity, and procedures. West coast congregations, for example, are seeking alignment with Franconia Conference on the east coast. In times such as this, people tend to compare their best selves with the worst of the other. We need, instead, to work at comparing our best with the best of others.

Clyde led in prayer for Ervin.

VMC Missional Story. In 2017 Mennonite Women USA will celebrate its 100th anniversary. The organization, originally an association of church sewing circles, was founded as Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society in Indiana in 1917, reported Elwood Yoder. VMC’s place in the Mennonite Women story is recorded in *Circles of Sisterhood* by Anita Hooley Yoder. That book tells the VMC quilt story—how Edith Shenk Kuhns organized women from Weavers Mennonite Church and Tanzanian women to craft a quilt auctioned off at the 205 Virginia Relief Sale. That quilt ended up in Tanzania as a wedding gift to a Tanzanian missionary. *Circles* also tells the tales of other VMC ministry circles as well. Elwood also highlighted missional efforts by VMC women Susanna Hartman Brunk, Brownie Driver, Gladys Driver, Anna Hertzler, Laura Wenger and Martha Shank Whissen.

Break. At 3 p.m. delegates recessed for afternoon workshops and the evening worship service. Delegates resumed the meeting at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, July 23.

15. **MWC update.** César García, General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference, updated delegates on Mennonite World Conference activities. MWC began after World War I in response to Jewish owned businesses being attacked and destroyed. Today MWC represents 105 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ, and the majority of members are African women. This year seven new conferences joined MWC.

There is still a lot of work to do. César displayed a photo, dated 2016, of a defunct store in southern Pennsylvania on which the Nazi symbol and “Sieg Heil 2016” was painted. Quoting Christian Neff, MCC’s founder, César said, “Our strength is great if we stand united in one faith and remain loyal to the brotherhood”. We succeed when we work together in a mutually supportive, interdependent, resource-sharing way.

16. **Generative question.** Delegates met in groups of six or seven to discuss the question, "What themes/issues should VMC leaders focus on over the next year?"

Feedback from groups

- How is that Isaac Villegas, under discipline in VMC, and the Rainbow Congregation (also under discipline) was able to present at MC USA? What does that say about the relationship between VMC and MC USA? Is it possible for VMC to hold together yet not belong to MC USA? FLC Chair Patsy Seitz reported that Isaac, in keeping with VMC policy, was suspended for an action that his congregation supported. FLC did not feel it could dictate MC USA's response.
- We are distracted by the current issues within VMC. After hearing César's report, what might we do to become more global?
- At the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread with his deeply divided disciples. How does God heal a body that is deeply divided?
- We want to hear more stories about how God is working.
- We are an anxious people anchored by hope in what the Task Force on Polity might accomplish.
- What will happen to our youth? How can we bring them in?

Missional story. Jason Wagner, a founding member of and elder at Early Church, shared his vision for his new assignment as chaplain to the Rockingham County/Harrisonburg City Jail. He hopes for a third way to care for the prison population. Coercion, our country's primary method, is a broken way: the percentage of incarcerated individuals is exponentially increasing; one in 128 children have a parent in jail; and it is extremely difficult for the formerly incarcerated to "get off paper". The incentive for change is missing since financial and political systems are dependent upon an expanding prison system. Jason shares the good news that Jesus offers: a spacious place to learn and grow, an invitation to costly discipleship, and living as a collective group where Jesus is King amidst a fear-driven culture. Chuck Hostetter, district minister for the TCK District, led in prayer for Jason.

17. **Report from VMissions.** Aaron Kauffman, president of VMissions, shared the recently revised Mission and Vision Statements, and reported on new congregations being formed in spite of severe challenges, new tranSenders trained, and volunteers recruited for the next year.

18. **Report from the Listening Committee, and Adjournment.** After a brief report (attached) from Carl Mericle on behalf of the listening committee, delegates worshipped in song and prayer. Summer Delegate Session 2017 adjourned at 11:55 a.m. Delegates will gather again at 8:30 a.m. on February 3, 2018 at Waynesboro Mennonite Church.

Summer Assembly 2017: "Neighbors: Strangers No More"
July 20-22, 2017
Minutes
Page 7

19. **Thank you resolution.** Delegates resolved "that we, the Virginia Mennonite Conference delegates, thank the Park View congregation for hosting our 105th and 106th Annual Assemblies (2016 & 2017), and for doing so in a generous and outstanding manner."

APPROVED

Respectfully submitted,

Edith Shenk Kuhns,
Secretary