



David Boshart, Moderator of Mennonite Church USA, speaks to Virginia Mennonite Conference delegates at Winter Delegate Session, February 2, 2019. This article is a summary of his presentation to delegates. Photo: Jon Trotter

## The church: a peculiar people in and for the world

By DAVID BOSHA RT

What is the nature of the church? This question is answered intentionally or unintentionally every day that the church lives and moves and has being. Mennonites have good reasons for struggling to define the nature of the church from an Anabaptist perspective. Some of these challenges include:

- the sheer number of images for the church that we find in our scriptures;
- the various expressions of the Anabaptist in the beginning; attempts to recover the Anabaptist vision (a la Harold S. Bender and Palmer Becker) have omitted essential aspects of the nature of the church;
- the paradigm shift from understanding

the mission of the church as sending to an understanding of the church as “sent;”

- our attempts to incorporate secular organizational models that are generally inadequate to capture the fullness of God’s hopes and dreams for God’s people.

As “the little flock,” Mennonites also struggle to maintain a consistent understanding of our polity where authority and the locus of decision making is concerned. We often gravitate toward different models of the church depending on a felt need for greater accountability or autonomy when tensions rise.

However, two things need to be said about structures and models: No model of polity will save us from needing to make

hard decisions, and no model of polity will save us if we neglect the spiritual practices of our common life in our local and regional expressions of the church.

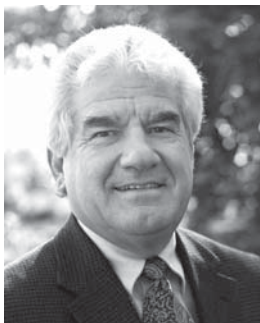
Describing the nature of the church is complex, but we can know some things about the nature of the church, particularly as we draw on the scriptures and early church tradition.

As Robert J. Suderman writes in *Re-Imagining the Church*, “God’s hopes and dreams will be en-fleshed within an alternative [paradigm-busting] community that will demonstrate ... [that God’s hopes and dreams] are indeed living possibilities. This is nothing less than the formation and vocation of the church, the body of Christ, as an echo of Eden and a prototype of the New

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# Re-energizing Virginia Mennonite Conference for mission

By ELROY MILLER, CONFERENCE MODERATOR



It is fascinating to reflect on the development of God's church in the New Testament. At the risk of being too simplistic, God steps into history with Jesus,

a humble but articulate man. A man with character, conviction and the message of good news, not only to the Jewish women and men of that day, but to the despised Gentiles. Jesus, the preacher, teacher, prophet, and healer challenged everybody to rethink their understanding of what it means to know God.

Jesus recast the ways of knowing God from ritual, sacrament and law, to having a personal relationship with God through himself with emphasis on grace, redemption and loving in keeping with the first and second commandments (Matt 22:36-39).

Mostly, Jesus worked outside of the established Jewish church of that day with lay people who he called to follow him. And many followed him all the way to Jerusalem, and then back out "...to make disciples of all the nations... to the end of the age," (Matt 28:18-20).

Only a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus, God again steps into history and calls the Apostle Paul, the Sanhedrin's "Harvard grad" so to speak, to follow him in life and death.

Paul was a learned and principled man. Before conversion, he was a traditionalist with a very strong sense of religious practice and ways of knowing God. He had a very strong commitment to the established church, even to the point of standing by as a Jesus-follower was stoned.

Yet God called him, not only to share the good news, but to establish and organize God's church far and wide. Two thousand years later, as members of God's worldwide church, we are still striving to walk with the Holy Spirit as followers of Jesus Christ as a conference and as congregations.

For me it begs the question, how do we, as members of God's church, follow Jesus Christ as Lord in the 21st century where many established church practices are two thousand years old, and a multitude of voices call for our attention (sometimes literally)?

Virginia Mennonite Conference delegates approved revised Conference mission and vision statements in the past year with a commitment to equip our church leaders and congregants for missional efforts in our communities. To that end, Conference Council recently approved an effort to lead the conference in a strategic planning effort. The intent is to renew the efforts of our conference and congregations to share the gospel in faith and life, and to invite our friends and neighbors to a life in Jesus.

As we engage this planning process, our prayer, as a conference and as congregations, is to be energized with power from on high to share God's good news. We desire to embody what it means to live faithfully, and serve God's mission to bring the peoples of our communities—and of this world—to faith in Jesus Christ.

May the words of 2 Corinthians 5:20 be so: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ." May we "...be reconciled to God" and with our neighbors near and far.

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**Correction:** The article by Pleasant View, Inc. in the Winter 2018 issue (page 7) mis-credited the author byline and photo credit. The article was written by Pamela Miller, Development Director, Pleasant View, Inc. We apologize for the error.

## Pathways Spring 2019 – Volume 4, Number 4

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Jerusalem.” This begs the question, “When you talk about who you are and what you are doing as a church—how often do you start with, or measure, your plans by asking, ‘How are we being an echo of Eden and prototype for the New Jerusalem?’”

What is clear from the biblical record is that the church has its roots in God’s priority to redeem creation by calling out a peculiar, particular people to be in the world and for the world. From Genesis to Revelation, this people is called forth through covenants offered and ratified by God (several texts that demonstrate the progressive development of covenantal principles include Genesis 9:8-17, 17:4-10; Jeremiah 31:31-37; Luke 22:14-20, and Ephesians 2:12, 19-22).



Delegates share around tables on questions posed by the presentation. Photo: Jon Trotter

A careful study of these texts reveals a number of principles about how God makes covenants:

- God is the primary actor; creatures are participants.
- Covenants include a declaration and a sign.
- Covenants are holistic—a melding of lives, not just interests.
- Participants in covenants close their exits
- Covenants are all encompassing, enduring and irrevocable
- If/when covenants are replaced, it is for the purpose of increasing interdependence and vulnerability
- God has gathered us up in a covenant community in the Body of Christ

We memorialize the covenant God has made with us in Jesus through the promises

we have made in our baptism and in our participation in the Body of Christ, symbolized at the Lord’s table. In times of tension and division, all covenantal members do well to review the promises they made when they joined the local, regional, or national body.

### What is the Body of Christ?

All founding documents of Mennonite Church USA understand the church to have local, regional, and national expressions. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* also refers to the global community of faith. We generally do not focus on structures and polity when it comes to the global church because, beyond the national church, the relationship shifts away from governance and program. Our global faith community is centered on fellowship, mutual learning, and encouragement in witness.

While the local congregation is the basic unit of the Body of Christ, it is not in itself the Body of Christ. In our current season, we often think about the distinctive functions of each expression of the church, and the unique authority and accountability systems that belong only to each one. We easily grow territorial when any part of the church admonishes any other part of the church.

However, our founding document envisioned the local, regional and national church in a dynamic relationship where each part contributes to common discernment of a holistic witness to God’s hopes and dreams for the reconciliation of all things in Jesus in an Anabaptist perspective. We together, as the church in all its expression, discern both our being and our doing.

As we think about the restructuring process in Virginia Mennonite Conference, the question could reasonably be raised: Why is the area conference necessary or useful?

Regional church structures are useful, needed, and inevitable. If we were to abruptly shut down our area conferences, I predict it would take about six weeks for congregations to start finding one another in order to organize for the larger mission.

The question is not whether conferences have value or not. The question is what role the conference system will play in supporting congregations to develop clarity of mission.

### Intentionality in Spiritual Discernment and Formation is Needed

The church’s alignment with God’s hopes and dreams for this peoplehood that lives as an echo of Eden and prototype for the New Jerusalem is discerned in two processes.

The first process is one of contextual spiritual discernment. The church consciously, semi-consciously, or unconsciously is always discerning how the gospel is at home in every context and how the gospel is foreign, or confronting, every context. Making this process more conscious is challenging when our presence to one another is increasingly thin and inconsistent.

The second process is how congregations develop clear pathways for people to move from novice to maturing disciples to sage elders. Typically, our churches work at preparing novices to be initiated into the community at baptism. Our church pours enormous resources into the formation of sage elders (pastors and other leaders).

Our church has grown haphazard in the discipling process between these two stations. When the muscles we use to attend to these processes are allowed to grow flabby, it creates the occasion for us to destroy God’s reconciling work among us.

My hypothesis is that churches that work consciously at discerning how the gospel is both at home and foreign to every context, and churches that take discipleship from novice to elder seriously, will be well-equipped to meet the challenges of controversial issues that test the church’s unity.

In other words, the single most important factor contributing to the divisions in our church is the lack of attention to intentional pathways that form mature disciples.

The question for Virginia Mennonite Conference is “What is the Conference structure doing when it fosters the resilience and witness of the local, regional, and national church?”



David Boshart is Moderator of Mennonite Church USA. He resides in Wellman, Iowa. His slideshow on this topic is at [virginiainconference.org/resources](http://virginiainconference.org/resources)



# How can we maintain our unity?

By RYAN AHLGRIM AND  
HAROLD N. MILLER

In his opening comments at Conference Assembly last summer, our moderator expressed a longing that we not see “our differences as more important than what we have together.” And our assistant moderator made an impassioned farewell plea, “Please stay together; please be a family.”

They indeed have grounds for uneasiness. We have differences that are both strong and deep. For instance, one stream in our conference sees opposing same-sex marriage as obedience to a loving God who undoubtedly knows what’s best for us, while another stream sees such opposition as intolerance somewhat akin to racism. Same-sex marriage, which some of us view as two persons making a loving commitment of mutual care and support, is seen by others of us as conduct that violates both natural law and scriptural command.

Convictions run so strong and deep on these matters that congregations have exited off both ends of the spectrum.

In the face of such strong division, can we nurture a healthy and faithful unity in Virginia Mennonite Conference? One thing that has helped conservative congregations feel at home in VMC is that its official stance is along the lines of their conscience, and one thing that has kept progressives in VMC is a hope that if they hold on, the official stance will eventually change. Is it possible that we can work through this and have an essential unity? If so, how?

We—Harold and Ryan—began corresponding with each other in the 1990s over same-sex relational issues as we read each other’s articles in the old Mennonite Church periodical, the *Gospel Herald*. We represented distinctly different viewpoints, but we have kept the dialogue going.

When one of us writes an article on the same-sex topic, we often send it to the other for comment and critique. In this way we have tried to avoid getting caught in an echo chamber of like-minded perspectives. We have found in the other a respectful and helpful dialogue partner who has improved our own understandings and discernment.

As Virginia Mennonite Conference (along with all the conferences in

Mennonite Church USA) struggles with the severe divisions caused by the gay marriage debate, we would like to offer certain principles for turning a divisive debate into a spiritual and helpful dialogue.

We begin with a common commitment to Scripture. We will lose the core of our shared faith and identity unless we commit to trust and yield to the broad themes and trajectories of Scripture. Reason, tradition, and experience are necessary partners in the dialogue, but the Bible remains our highest authority for spiritual guidance and discernment.

As we interpret Scripture, we will inevitably agree and disagree. Our history shows that on other issues we can remain together in one conference while differing on the interpretation of various texts.

A primary step in biblical interpretation is exegesis. We determine, as far as we are able, what a given text likely meant in its original context. We try to avoid reading

**It is contrary to the way of love to say that we will listen only for a while. So long as we continue to bring new thoughts, questions, information and experiences to each other, and so long as we are still potentially learning from each other, the dialogue should continue.**

into texts our own preferences or assumptions. For instance, we (Ryan and Harold) agree that in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6, it is most likely that Paul intended to reject all (not just some) same-gender sexual relationships as being against God’s will.

Another crucial step in interpretation is application for today. Agreeing on the exegesis of a text does not mean we agree on the text’s proper application for us. We must answer questions such as: Is this text’s assertion universally valid, or is it limited by its cultural context and assumptions? (For instance, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”) Is this text qualified by other texts that give different perspectives, or by other passages that articulate an ethi-

cal principle at variance with this text? (For instance, “Women should be silent in the churches.”)

We don’t need to agree with each other as we apply the texts on same-sex relations, but we do need to be able to empathize with each other’s understanding—see that it is compelled by careful study of Scripture and seeking the Spirit of Christ. Our unity as a body of believers rests on us knowing that we have a common heart to follow Jesus and God’s will as revealed through Scripture. Can we reach that point? To know whether we have such a unity of heart, we must engage in meaningful and deep dialogue.

Dialogue means careful and respectful listening. “If one gives answer before hearing, it is folly and shame” (Proverbs 18:13). “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak” (James 1:19). We are failing to adequately listen if we cannot repeat back the other’s viewpoint in a convincing way that satisfies the other.

It is contrary to the way of love to say that we will listen only for a while. So long as we continue to bring new thoughts, questions, information and experiences to each other, and so long as we are still potentially learning from each other, the dialogue should continue.

Dialogue should not be confused with acceptance of variance. Such an approach would be an automatic capitulation to a progressive perspective on blessing same-sex marriage. Rather, dialogue takes our differences seriously; we will not always tolerate particular beliefs or practices as consistent with our shared faith. Some commitments and beliefs are essential, or our unity is no longer Christian. (For instance, we could not remain in unity with a congregation that no longer affirms “Jesus is Lord.”)

Dialogue has no insistence on a certain end result. Real dialogue assumes we will all be enlightened and changed. We do not talk together for the sake of changing the other but for the sake of understanding the other. Change might happen—whenever one talks with someone, that’s a possibility. But that must not be the initial goal. It is arrogance if we decide how the issue is going to be resolved before talking with those who disagree with us. The end result

may be something none of us quite expects. God may surprise us.

The goal of our dialogue should be a win-win resolution. In a marital conflict, if one wins and the other loses, both have lost. As in marriage, so it is in our covenanted collection of congregations we call Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Our goal is not for one side to win an argument. Rather, the goal is always to find, if possible, a solution that satisfies the faithfulness each side seeks (e.g., conservatives seeing progressives as committed to Scripture, progressives seeing conservatives as loving their neighbor).

Faith and practice are discerned between congregations as well as within congregations. Our congregations in Virginia Conference are in a relationship of mutual accountability. So major matters of faith and practice must be discerned by all of us together, rather than each congregation being free to go its own way without repercussion to our covenant.

Ministerial credentials should not be used contrary to the policies and positions

collectively agreed upon by the congregations of the conference. Since we are a conference of congregations covenanted together, and since ministerial credentials are held by the conference and not the congregation, credentialed leaders are ultimately accountable to the conference, not just to their own congregation. Credentialed leaders are representing the conference when exercising that credential, and so it is a violation of trust to use that credential in a way that violates the policies or positions of the conference.

Conscience may necessitate disobedience. We are a faith tradition that began out of civil disobedience and putting spiritual conscience ahead of other authority. So we ought to show respect and as much deference as possible when a congregation and its leadership, after serious biblical and prayerful study (within the congregation and with other congregations), concludes that they must, out of faithfulness to their best understanding of the gospel, violate a conference policy or position.

In such cases, credentials should be voluntarily relinquished. When a pastor, out of conscience, plans to use the credential in a way that violates the discernment of the conference, we believe that leader should first offer to relinquish the credential since the proposed pastoral action no longer represents the conference.

As we in Virginia Mennonite Conference follow these principles, we are better positioned for our moderators' longings to be fulfilled. And we are better able to thrive and honor Christ in our mission of equipping persons to worship and serve and bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far.



Ryan Ahlgrim is pastor of First Mennonite Church, Richmond, Va.



Harold N. Miller is pastor of Trissels Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va.

## My journey to Washington Community Fellowship

By ANDREW CHEUNG

Call me strange, but there's something mildly satisfying about lining up Lego pieces and pressing them with a tactile click. Things just seem to fit well together.

That sensation is a bit like the process of discerning a good fit for your gifts as a pastoral leader and the needs of a faith community. When everything comes together well, the "satisfying tactile click" of Lego building blocks comes out in the "amens" of a pastor and the congregation.

In some ways, my journey to become the pastor of Washington Community Fellowship (WCF) in 2018 was kind of like throwing my personal collection of Lego bricks together with a new friend and realizing how together, they might become something crafted by a Master Designer.

Prior to arriving in Washington, DC, I had been serving as a staff pastor at a diverse, urban Christian and Missionary Alliance church (albeit with a blend of contemporary worship, traditional liturgy, contemplative spiritual practices and active social justice ministries) on the

opposite side of the continent. Each Sunday, I would stand up and share the vision of our church to help people "discover Christ, experience spiritual transformation and seek justice."

I found ministry in this unique church to be a rare fit for my Christian journey through the Mennonite, Charismatic-Pentecostal, Reformed and Contemplative traditions. Yet, I couldn't shake this pull to relocate back to the United States, my birthplace—but not really my home—like Vancouver had been all my life. Uprooting my family from a vibrant church community, from



Andrew Cheung with his wife Julia, daughter Ashley, and son Evan. Courtesy of Andrew Cheung

lifelong friendships and the only home they had known would need some clear confirmation.

When I did the typical website-creeping of a church after seeing WCF's posting for a new senior pastor, I was intrigued by

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**My journey** continued from page 5

this “Christ-centered, multi-denominational church affiliated with the Mennonite denomination” located on Capitol Hill. “Hmmm... a church community that isn’t locked into one particular stream of Christian tradition.” Lego block click #1.

To my further surprise, their vision to be a community of “personal transformation, authentic community, vibrant worship and social impact” seemed to roll off my tongue in a familiar way. Lego block click #2.

As website-creeping turned into a Google Hangouts call which turned into a visit with the search committee, I became endeared by this beautiful community of Jesus-followers gathering together regularly at the corner of 9th and Maryland Ave. NE.

Fast forward a few months, my family and I landed in August of 2018 to the warm welcome of my new DC church family (and the not-so-welcome surprise of DC heat, humidity and mosquitos) to begin the pastorate at WCF.

As I began my ministry to the church, I heard the faithful reverberations of the founding pastor, Myron Augsburg, in WCF’s desire to walk in love as a new community

in Christ. One of WCF’s particular distinctives has been to honor the richness of the different theological backgrounds that make up our community with intentionality and collaboration.

Being a city that draws people from all over the nation—across the political, social and theological spectrums—WCF is strengthened by leaders and congregants who lend their Presbyterian, Baptist, and Catholic expressions that enrich us as a worshipping community. Perhaps this is where the Mennonite gift of reconciliation is most immediately seen at WCF.

My first six months have been a time of orienting and relating to a quickly-changing WCF community and surrounding community. Over the years, our neighborhood has become increasingly gentrified, which brings development and safer neighborhoods at the expense of increased living costs and displacement of longtime residents.

Church buildings housing traditionally African-American communities are being sold and redeveloped into condominiums for the upwardly mobile. Amidst the bustle of shiny new buildings, hip restaurants and renovated Victorian row-homes are families trying to navigate the education lottery for their children and longtime residents won-

dering when they won’t be able to afford to live in the only neighborhood they grew up in. Though we have come a long way, the ebbing boundaries of age, race and class are still clearly still at play in this city.

As we look to the future, I’m praying that the mission of WCF to the immediate neighboring community will become clearer as we seek to build relationships with the vulnerable who are marginalized socio-economically and relationally.

With a prayerful posture, I hope to see glimmers of God’s grace at work in places that may surprise us as we step into worlds different from our own. A wise Methodist pastor I met gave me some helpful insight into the city here: There’s Washington—along with the politics and posturing everyone sees in the media. And then, there’s DC—the residents who live and make a home here.

My hope is that WCF would be faithful to Jesus’ call to bridge “Washington” and “DC” in Jesus’ name and for Jesus name’s sake.



Andrew Cheung is pastor of Washington Community Fellowship, Washington DC.

## Who and what is Stephens City Mennonite Church?

By MERLE CHRISTNER

**Who is Stephens City Mennonite Church? Why do we exist as a congregation? Who should we be? What is the future of SCMC?** We have been wrestling with these questions for the past several years. We have been meeting about once a month for the past year and a half, talking about how we are connecting to and engaging with our community.

The reality is that we are a very small congregation. We have had our highs and lows in attendance during our 60-year history, but now average in the low 20s for Sunday morning worship. A very real concern is the congregation’s future existence.

The present members and attendees are a very committed and dedicated group of believers. We are concerned about social issues which affect the community and the world. In addition to the wider Mennonite Church agencies, the congregation also

supports (and a number of the members volunteer in various ways) local agencies (see sidebar).

But the questions remain: *Who should we be? What should we be doing? Where is our future?* We have spent much time at our monthly meetings discussing what we have to offer the community, what the needs of the community are, and reflecting on how we could bring these two together. We have also spent much time in prayer as a congregation and individually, asking God where we are to join in God’s mission in our community.

We recognized that the name, Mennonite, is known by many as being connected with peace. So last summer we felt the need and inaugurated Peace Camp for elementary-age children. While we do not have

Continued on next page

### Current SCMC Involvement:

- Congregational Community Action Project (CCAP); serves food, clothing, rent and utility assistance needs.
- Winchester Area Temporary Thermal Shelter (WATTS); temporary short-term housing for homeless persons in winter.
- Middletown Area Mission Action (MAMA) Project; provides weekend bag lunches for elementary students on the school lunch assistance program and holiday family meals.
- AbbaCare Pregnancy Center; providing education, counseling and medical assistance.
- Just4Kidz; SCMC after-school elementary age program started about seven years ago with SCMC and local Lutheran and United Methodist churches.
- Valley Interfaith Council; interfaith group concerned with social justice issues affecting the community.
- Some are also volunteering with a literacy program, ESL programs, and immigration support.





Four churches were invited to share in the Christgiving (Christmas + Thanksgiving) celebration with Stephens City Mennonite Church in December 2018. Courtesy of Merle Christner

any elementary-age children and have not had anything like Bible School for several years, eleven children attended our first year Peace Camp. We hope to build on this beginning.

While we have been actively seeking answers, we have become more aware of our local surroundings and have made ourselves more available when opportunities

arise. These opportunities may not always be in areas we anticipated. For example, our facilities have been used by other groups, such as the afterschool kids program, two music groups for practice and concerts, and a music teacher for lessons. In the past year, a Spanish speaking congregation, seeking a space to meet, started meeting twice each week in the building. A Girl Scout troop has

been meeting each week in the fellowship hall. Our congregation now uses the building only 25% of the total number of hours the building is in use.

We are located on edge of town with no surrounding neighborhood; however, a new housing development surrounding our property has begun building infrastructure in preparation for 90 new homes with the potential of another 90 coming later. We hope to be able to connect in some way with our new neighbors.

We have recently become aware of Winchester Together, a newly formed organization focusing on the working families living at or just above the poverty line in Winchester and Frederick County. Their mission is consistent with the things we have identified as needs in our community and we are now considering partnering with them in whatever way we can.

*What is the future of Stephens City Mennonite Church and how are we to impact our local community?* We don't know. We request you pray with us as we simply ask God to lead us and make us aware of where and how we are to serve.



Merle Christner is pastor of Stephens City Mennonite Church, Stephens City, Va.

## Family Life Resource Center: a growing family

By MARIE BRADLEY AND LES HORNING

At Family Life Resource Center, the first word in our name is “family”. That is no accident. Since our Center’s beginning over three decades ago, we’ve believed that distressed individuals and partners need to pay attention to the family systems to which they belong. In 1985 a Virginia Mennonite Conference Committee studied the need for a counseling and resource center. Shortly thereafter FLRC opened in July of 1987 in a church to start offering services to local people. The organization continued to grow and occupied its own office in 1990.

In the 30+ years since its formation, the name “Family Life Resource center” has stayed the same but the “Family” has

grown. FLRC maintains its roots of providing marriage counseling and resources but has branched out and grown into a full-service counseling agency with a group of qualified therapists offering a wide range of specialized skills. The “Family” that began with Virginia Mennonite Conference is now also well-connected to the broader Harrisonburg community, recognizing that healthy individuals lead to healthy relationships which lead to healthy congregations and communities.

Outside of our agency statement and Christ-centered mission, our goal is to help people realize the importance of mental health. Mental health challenges, mental illnesses and basic life challenges emerge no matter one’s age, faith, family background or educational level. The suicide

rate continues to rise in Virginia and it does not discriminate based on age, gender or ethnicity. So many people focus on their physical health and don’t realize that mental and physical health go hand-in-hand. It is FLRC’s desire that all who walk through the front door at 273 Newman Avenue will encounter a sense of family, a sense of belonging and being valued as soon as they step across the threshold.

In the words of one of our counselors “I have seen despair turn to hope. I have seen self-loathing turn to self-accepting. I have seen spiritual confusion turn to spiritual confidence and strength. I have seen broken relationships turn to repaired relationships”

# EMU offers new campus worship opportunities

By LAUREN JEFFERSON

Campus worship at Eastern Mennonite University has a whole new look and length, both in Lehman Auditorium and with volunteer leaders across campus.

Campus Pastor Brian Martin Burkholder's Tuesday email arrives in inboxes with the message line: "What will you choose?" The campus community can take their pick: STEM fans explore science and faith, a men's group talks about masculinity, commuter students get together, Peace Fellowship and the Center for Interfaith Engagement offer an interfaith breakout, the Chronicles of Yarnia gather for knitting and reflection.



Students knit in a Wednesday chapel break-out session called "The Chronicles of Yarnia," hosted by administrative assistant Barb Byer. The small group sessions during chapel time have expanded faith-sharing opportunities for students, faculty and staff. Photo: Andrew Strack/EMU

some of the audience—heading out to class or other commitments while music was playing, a speaker was wrapping up conclusions, or announcements were completed. The amount of time for chapel wasn't the only concern Burkholder and the campus ministries council shared. They were asking questions attentive to enhancing faith and spiritual life on campus.

Would other formats for gathering be more formational? Could more options be offered to meet more community and individual needs?

The experimental answer is programming that is both "invitational and intentional," Burkholder says, offering multiple

spaces in venues facilitated by volunteer campus community leaders - students, faculty and staff. "This structure expands our time together, offers choices for how a person wants to engage and brings people into spaces around campus where they are both comfortable and challenged. We are broadening our ministry to better meet the growing diversity of our student body in connected and collaborative ways."



Lauren Jefferson is Editor-In-Chief within Eastern Mennonite University's Marketing and Communications Department.



Photo: Andrew Strack/EMU

"One worship style is never going to fulfill everybody's spiritual needs," says pastoral assistant Lindsay Acker. Acker. "There is so much opportunity to do your own thing."

The new format, says pastoral assistant Luke Hertzler, "a beautiful and energizing space for the EMU community to come together centered around Christ ... embracing unity in diversity."

This revisioning has been years in the making. During many past chapel services, Burkholder kept an eye on the clock, watching the 30 minutes trickle away. So, too, did

## Pastoral transitions (January to March 2019)

J. Harold Bergey, former oversight leader of Eastern District, moved to retired status on January 15.

Russell "Russ" Walker Eanes retired from MennoMedia in January 2018, and to retired status on January 15.

Emma and J. Mark Frederick transferred from Central District to Harrisonburg District for their work as coaches at IDA, on March 9.

Del Glick moved to active status; he is serving as interim pastor at Bossler Mennonite Church in Elizabethtown, PA effective February 19.

John "Johnnie G" Gnanamanickam, co-pastor at Mt. Pleasant Mennonite Church; licensing is scheduled for March 17.

Jim Hershberger transferred from Admin/Leadership cluster to Central District; he has

accepted the role of lead pastor at Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church beginning in April.

Mark Keller moved to retired status. He retired on December 18, 2018.

MaryBeth Heatwole Moore was ordained on March 7; she is founder and lead pastor of Signs of Life Fellowship

Gregory "Greg" Gene Stenson was ordained in VMC on March 7, ; he is lead pastor at Mt. Vernon Mennonite Church.

Paula H. Stoltzfus transferred from Franconia Conference on January 30, 2019; she is care and formation pastor at Park View Mennonite Church.

Tyler Yoder, church planter in Richmond, is scheduled for licensing on April 7, 2019.





# Women encouraging women ...through prayer

February 21, 2019 • Ridgeway Mennonite Church

All photos and design courtesy of Gloria Lehman

Many hands prepared the foods that composed the evening meal prior to our meeting. Delicious Latino and local dishes filled our tables and warmed our hearts.



We were so grateful for a full house! Ladies kept coming, and we kept adding tables and chairs so all would have a seat at the table to fellowship together.



Veronica Sanchez (left) shared about her call from God and experiences in church planting ministry. It was wonderful to hear stories of healing and transformation as God works through this ministry to grow the kingdom. Melody Miller (right) interpreted.



Gloria Lehman (left), President of MWV Exec. Committee, and Kathy Risser (right), Ridgeway Mennonite Church, welcomed the ladies to the event. Lizzette Hernandez (center) interpreted.



Praise songs led by Grazia Hernandez opened the meeting for the 130 women gathered together.



Angelina Pardini (right) told of her recent experience partnering with a church in Jordan, and its refugee ministry. Along with her team, she had an enriching experience of forming relationships with refugee children by helping coach at a soccer camp and holding activities at their school. Lizzette Hernandez (left) interpreted.

## 2019 Upcoming Events

### Annual Prayer Breakfast

Saturday, July 20, 2019  
EMHS 6:45am

### Annual Women's Retreat

October 25-27, 2019

Short Pump Marriott, Richmond, VA  
Deb Horst will present how we can be better "Rooted In Christ," focusing on Colossians 2:6-7.

Registration forms available soon.

With this year's emphasis on prayer, we spent time praying for VMC missionaries around the world: for encouragement, strength, effective words and deeds to promote God's kingdom here on earth. We then looked over the list of VMC churches and ministries, and began the selection process to financially support these ministries. Over \$5,700 was raised in less than 15 minutes—always a fun and inspiring event to participate in!

# Creating a school culture with dignity for all

By ANDREA WENGER

Creating a school culture that supports the inherent dignity and worth of all “isn’t rocket science,” Kathy Evans, told Eastern Mennonite School teachers and administrators in February. “But it’s really hard.”

Evans, professor of teacher education at Eastern Mennonite University, led two professional development sessions on restorative practices in education. It’s becoming more common to hear about restorative discipline in schools, Evans noted. But we want to shift an entire school culture to a place of respect and mutual concern.

Restorative concepts aren’t new to EMS. Administrators and teachers often use a circle process to create safe space for difficult conversations. In a circle, participants face each other and pass a “talking piece.” Only the person with the talking piece may talk; others listen. Participants can “pass” when the piece comes to them. Everyone has a chance to be heard.

This fall, teachers practiced circle process skills in a staff meeting. Justin King, high school principal, and Maria Archer, K-8 principal, facilitated. Each week,

Archer emails middle and high school teachers ideas to use in their student Neighbor Group meetings in circles or general discussion. Examples include: “Are ‘success’ and happiness the same thing?” “What does respect look like between students?” “Between students and teachers?” “How does gossip affect a school community?”

“Using circles for general discussion helps everyone become familiar with the format,” Archer explains. “That way, when we are dealing with a conflict or a difficult situation, the process is not new.”

At the fall practice time with faculty, King admitted that some students—and adults—may be skeptical. “What is this ‘mumbo jumbo?’ students may ask. But there is something special about sitting in a circle. It slows us down. When we make time for one person to share and others to focus on them, it’s hard not to listen.”

Middle and high school teachers are using the model and other tools to work



Science teacher Lee Good (right) and other students listen to the student with the talking piece during Neighbor Group at EMS. EMS photo by Andrea Wenger

toward a school culture where every student is known and “nurtured to their capacity,” as Evans encouraged.

Circles have been implemented for more than 10 years at the elementary level. Students learn through peacebuilding classes and Mennonite Education Agency’s Encounter Bible curriculum. The materials build on the concept of shalom, which includes talking about building peace with creation, God, myself and others.

Andrea Wenger is EMS Director of Advancement.

## Letter exchange bridges generations, cultures

By MAUREEN B. PEARSON

The power of the written word is still relevant to residents at the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community and seventh and eighth grade students in the Bridging English class at Skyline Middle School in Harrisonburg, Va.

Spawned from a book club discussion on “Enrique’s Journey” by Sonia Nazario, residents from VMRC became pen pals with students from Tanzania, Uganda, DRC, Iran, Mexico, El Salvador, Spain and Puerto Rico. The book is the story of a Central American boy’s search to locate his mother who left him to find work in the United States.

Terri Martin, teacher of the class, suggested five questions for students to ask their pen pals. The residents responded with their own questions, said VMRC

resident Angela Rempel and member of Ridgeway Mennonite Church. The pen pals began writing in January and continued for the semester.



Angela Rempel, VMRC resident, corresponds with a pen pal in D.R. Congo. Courtesy photo

Mrs. Rempel’s pen pal is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In one of her earliest letters, she shared that she and her husband had visited that country in 1984 for two weeks while on a church mission trip.

Did their age difference of 60+ years make it difficult? Mrs. Rempel said she referenced family members to develop a

connection. “I tried to relate to him through my 13-year old granddaughter,” said Mrs. Rempel, who acknowledged not knowing much about sports but her granddaughter did.

Mrs. Rempel said she is looking forward to meeting her pen pal before the spring semester comes to an end. “If I can help them feel welcome, more at home, then hopefully that is helpful to them.”

The pen pal experience “humanized the story” of Enrique, said Lolly Miller, arts and education manager at VMRC. “This is a story that is actually happening in our community. Discussing this issue enhances our own lives.”



Maureen B. Pearson is Director of Public Relations & Outreach at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community.



# My desire to be ‘disciplined by hope’

By CLYDE G. KRATZ



Princeton Theological Seminary was founded in 1812 by the General Assembly of Presbyterian Church.

Recently, President Craig Barnes launched a leadership initiative “to examine the institution’s historic connections to slavery.”

“The historical audit report, which is the product of more than two years of research, uncovers contradictions and complexities in the practices, attitudes, and theological convictions of the Seminary’s early faculty, students, and donors. It clearly depicts both profound moral failings and courageous acts of faithfulness to the gospel.” The report states, “This research provides not only a critical reckoning with our past, but also a basis for conversation about the ongoing legacy of racism that is rooted in this history.”

Throughout this past year, a number of persons were invited to the seminary to reflect on the legacy of slavery. One of those persons was Dr. Willie James Jennings, associate professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale University Divinity School and the author of *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*.

“He (Jennings) has quite literally written the book on the construction of race in the Christian tradition,” President Barnes articulated. “Jennings speaking on the theme of Princeton’s legacy of our history of slavery provides an insight about this type of journey as ‘disciplined by hope.’”

In Virginia this past February, the issues of slavery, segregation, and racism again became part of the public discourse. The governor and the attorney general acknowledged that they put on blackface in the 1980s, part of a long and ugly history of racist stereotyping in Virginia and elsewhere. The governor’s experience occurred during his medical college years and had been placed in the yearbook. The initial

political fallout focused on the governor’s behavior, but the educational institution that published the photos also came under scrutiny. The past was being revisited in all its ugliness.

It is very plausible that the Virginia Mennonite Conference history project will shed light on our past on these same subjects in unflattering ways. Dr. Steven Nolt, a noted Mennonite historian, is writing a history of our actions and legacy as a religious community.

It is recognized that the Conference began around 1835. A ministers gathering took place that year at Weavers Mennonite Church, and the minutes of that meeting are preserved.

**I believe God calls us as followers of Jesus to be agents of reconciliation that includes seeking to heal the injustices in which, by either commission or omission, we were a participant.**

Our Conference is located in the state of the capital of the Confederacy. The evangelistic endeavors of our leaders led them to Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee, all of which were Confederate states. Outreach ministries occurred in Newport News, Richmond, and Harrisonburg.

In light of this context, there will be stories of shame. There will be stories of hopefully well-intentioned leaders with sincere desires to serve God and be faithful to their beliefs, but who also may have harbored harmful beliefs and negatively interacted with African-Americans.

As a leader seeking to grow and be “disciplined by hope” as we acknowledge the realities of the past and present, I shall move into this season of reflection and own our past. I shall seek to chart a new future on matters of race and peoplehood.

I challenge us to listen to people’s stories and encounters with our past without

becoming defensive. The discipline of hope that I am committed to is:

- learning about our actual past
- acknowledging the pain and uneasiness of the stories that come out
- accepting the experiences of others and own our church’s role
- offering confessions and repentance for wrong attitudes and actions

In doing this, we will be able to envision a future as an emerging peoplehood of God that can transform the world.

As part of my journey, I am reading Debby Irving’s book *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. Her challenge to examine the childhood stereotypes of people of different cultures is illuminating. She recounts how the GI Bill provided returning white soldiers with economic advantage which appeared to provide the fulfillment of the American dream for them.

However, the same program contributed to the further disenfranchisement of returning African-American soldiers because of restrictions based on the geographical location of black communities.

I wonder in what ways our faith community benefited from these programs, such as an increase in real estate values when the government infused funding into the housing markets.

For some individuals, racism is not seen as a missional concern. I beg to differ. I believe God calls us as followers of Jesus to be agents of reconciliation that includes seeking to heal the injustices in which, by either commission or omission, we were a participant.

As we uncover the stories of our past, lets us be prepared to listen, to understand, to offer confession, and develop new ways to shape our future, so that subsequent generations will not be generationally hampered by our past mistakes.

Clyde G. Kratz is Executive Conference Minister of Virginia Mennonite Conference.





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VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE  
**ASSEMBLY 2019**  
JULY 18-20 • HARRISONBURG, VA

WORSHIP AT LINDALE MENNONITE CHURCH  
DELEGATE SESSIONS AT EASTERN MENNONITE SCHOOL

# CULTIVATING GOOD SOIL

And some fell into  
**good soil** and grew,  
and **yielded a hundredfold.**

- Luke 8:8

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