

Connections

Virginia Mennonite
Conference & Virginia
Mennonite Missions

August 2007
Vol. 17, No. 10

**Live the
call!
¡Vive el
llamado!**

Ephesians 4: 1-6 / Efesios 4:1-6



Photo by Jon Trotter



Photo by Brian Schlabach

Mennonites gather to “live the call” in San Jose

As one of Virginia Mennonite Conference’s seven delegates, I enjoyed a glorious gathering of worship and work as nearly 2,000 adults came together for MC USA’s biennial convention in San Jose, Calif., July 2-6, 2007. VMC members were the fifth largest group present. About 10 VMC congregations brought youth to the convention. They joined with nearly 4,000 other young people, mainly high schoolers, for a week of dynamic worship, service projects, workshops, fun and fellowship.

The delegates’ session included lengthy discussions about health care which built on dialogue begun at Charlotte 2005. Those deliberations climaxed in a 93% affirmative vote on a resolution which stated, “...as a denomination, we are committed in principle to providing basic health insurance for all eligible pastors...we request the Executive Board oversee the development and implementation of a plan whereby all congregations of MC USA participate together in an arrangement that covers all of our pastors with basic health insurance.” The delegates were encouraged by the fact that the Executive Board, MMA and the mission agencies have all expressed interest in participating in the new plan. It will draw from a larger pool and replace the existing denominational health plan for congregational employees (COMB). Jim Schrag, MC USA’s executive director, likened this resolution to completing the first lap of a four-lap race. The race won’t be won until the details of the plan are developed and individual congregations affirm their participation in it.

In other actions the delegates approved MC USA’s joining Christian Churches Together a “fellowship of Christian churches...whose mission is ‘to enable churches and national Christian organizations to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian witness to the world.’” They also affirmed Ed Diller, a lawyer from Cincinnati, as moderator-elect. Former moderator Roy William goes off the board while Sharon Waltner, a health educator from South Dakota, took the reigns as moderator. Bishop Leslie Francisco, from Calvary Community Church in Hampton, Va., completed his term on the executive board and Glen Guyton, also from Calvary, was appointed to the board. Natalie Francisco was reappointed to a second term on MMA’s board.

Two VMC members in particular had high profiles at Convention. Eastern Mennonite Seminary professor Mary Thiessen Nation brought the morning message at the adult worship session on Tuesday. Drawing on her 18 years of experience working in inner-city Los Angeles, she encouraged telling our stories, and remembering the biblical stories, in our journey toward emotional and spiritual healing. Also Luke Hartman, who works with Harrisonburg City schools, spoke to the youth.

If you have never been to a biennial Mennonite Convention, I encourage you to do so. Mark your calendars now, and plan to come to the next one in Columbus, Ohio, June 29-July 4, 2009.

• Steve Carpenter
Virginia Mennonite Conference Coordinator

Faith through time

“Time is the water in which we live, and we breathe it like fish...For what is a man, what are we all, but bits of time caught for a moment in a tangle of blood, bones, skin, and brain? We are time’s containers. Time pours into us and then pours out again. In between the two pourings we live our destiny.” (Nanapush in Louise Erdrich’s *Four Souls*, p29, Harper Perennial, 2005)



Owen Burkholder
Conference Minister

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” Hebrews 1:1-2 (NRS)

My scientist friends say it is impossible for human beings to think outside of space-time dimensions. That leads to the great speculations on either side of our lifespan: where were we before we were born? Where do we go when we die? (Notice, those are space [where] and time [when] questions.)

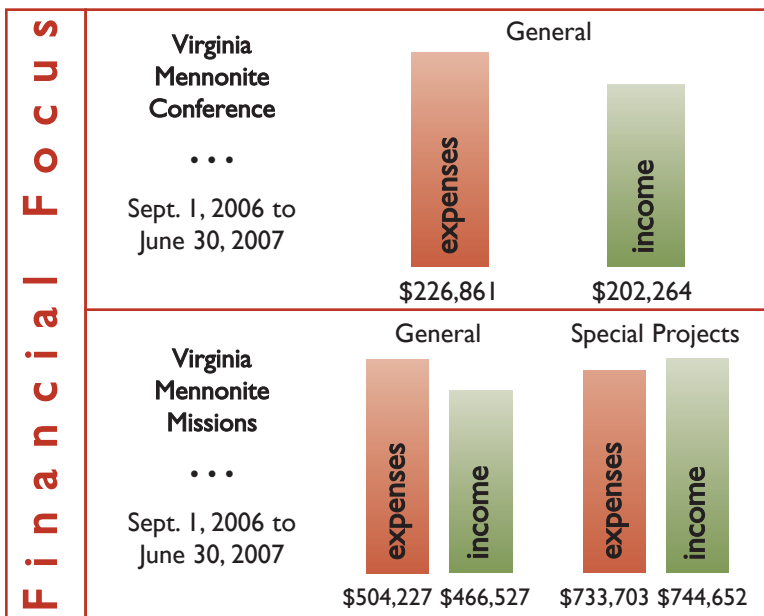
In my message to the VMC Assembly at Hickory on July 26, I offered the following statement as a beginning place for our faith: **God creates space-time and engages it in Jesus Christ.**

Faith goes two ways—from the unknown to the known, and from the known to the unknown. When we say that “God” created space-time, we are speaking of things that we simply cannot know with our human space-time limitations. It is a statement of

faith that the unknown makes itself known to us. On the other hand, when we explore the “Jesus Christ” record, we are going from what eyewitnesses observed and projecting it through space-time to God—backward and forward from our point of view.

To affirm, then, that God “spoke” in times past and that God “speaks in these last days” through Jesus Christ is to affirm that God has a real interest in space-time. It matters what the Creator says. And, to affirm that the One who is beyond space-time entered into it through a birth, joined in death, and transforms it through resurrection, is to affirm that the life of Jesus of Nazareth brings us to the purpose of God for human beings.

Space-time is God-blessed, God-entered, God-transformed. A life of faith is a life of partnership with God through Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit of Jesus who now enables us to live this life of faith—a life that invites the ‘beyond space-time Presence’ into our human space-time bound existence.



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Lifting up ex-prisoners: “the least of these”

“The body of Christ has a mandate from God to care for the least of these,” says Bishop Paul Gaskins of the Christian Conquest Ministries in Washington, DC. “I believe the body of Christ should have the heart of the Lord in its vision and purpose. And this includes the planning for the coming home of brothers and sisters from prison.”

This has provided the passion behind the mission of the Conquest Reintegration Ministries (CORM), a ministry begun by Christian Conquest Fellowship, a Virginia Mennonite Conference congregation in Washington, DC. As many as 3,000 former prisoners return to the District each year, many with a limited education, no job skills, frayed family relations, and empty pockets. CORM’s Transitional Housing Center (THC) provides a place for ex-prisoners to live as they reintegrate into the society around them. Structure and rules are in place at the THC to foster accountability and discipline. A compassionate Christian environment that respects the dignity of the men residing there is created. Bible studies and support groups are held on a regular basis.

According to Rev. Louis Jones, Executive Director of CORM, “one of the most trying aspects of working with ex-prisoners is finding businesses who will give them jobs.” Mark Ty Purvis was told that he would never work in his field again due to his tax fraud conviction. After his release from prison, he went to Conquest House, had a roof over his head, a place to fax resumes and make phone calls, vouchers for clothing, and some of his food. “I could focus on working toward employment and a career.” After a job as a temporary substitute teacher, his excellent performance led to a full-time math teacher position. He credits CORM with giving him the boost he needed to get his life back on track, and sees himself as the recipient of the Lord’s blessings in his life.

Minister LaVerne Brewster of Christian Conquest Fellowship also conducts Bible studies at a detention facility for women. “We try to get them to see that while prison and drugs may have devoured them, it has not negated God’s purpose for their lives,” she stated. “We are excited because as we minister to these women, the Holy Spirit also pours out His Spirit upon us.”

• Story by David Powell
Virginia Mennonite Conference Peace Committee

Chinese believers find a home away from home

Hong Yan Zhou, 42, known by his American friends as “Jack,” became a Christian just over seven years ago. Married and with a young daughter, he was a post graduate student at Chongqing University in southern China working on a linguistics degree.

Hong Yan says, “Early in 2000, I was praying for a revelation from a God I had never known, some true divine being. Immediately afterwards a Christian graduate student from Auburn University approached me and helped open my eyes to Jesus.” The two became friends, and soon Hong Yan and his wife Bo Hu were leading a newly formed Christian house church. Theirs was one of countless numbers of unregistered home church fellowships that are springing up all over China, resulting in the phenomenal spread of Christianity in that country. But before long, the local State Security Council apprehended Hong Yan three times, their apartment was searched, and he was ordered not to take part in any more unregistered church activities.

In 2004 he had the opportunity to spend a semester at Eastern Mennonite University. While here, he was granted asylum status through the US State Department. Then after two years of much prayer and testing, the dream of Bo Hu and ten-year old daughter Emily (Zhiyang) joining him was realized in August 2006.

Currently the three are making their home with Rachel Stoltzfus, a member of the Harrisonburg-based Family of Hope House Church. Through Rachel, the Zhous have found a church home away from home in Family of Hope.

Soon after their arrival in the US, Emily entered a statewide “Drawing Your Dreams” poster contest sponsored by the Virginia College Savings Plan. Her painting of herself as a future veterinarian treating a family of pandas won a first-place prize for her grade level and netted a full, four-year scholarship to any Virginia public university for which she is later accepted.

Members of Family of Hope feel blessed to have the Zhous in their fellowship, and hope many others learn to know these wonderful neighbors and friends.



Hong Yan Zhou, his wife, Bo Hu, and daughter, Emily.

• Harvey Yoder
Family of Hope

Friendship in tragedy's wake

Church offers comfort to Koreans after Virginia Tech shootings

When the Rev. James Rhee first heard about the shootings at Virginia Tech, he was consumed by grief for the victim's families and overwhelmed with guilt that a fellow Korean had killed 32 Americans.

It was as if the gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, a senior at Tech, was his own son who had gone on a rampage and randomly opened fire on students and professors before turning the gun on himself on the morning of April 16.

Rhee had received a warm welcome from members of Stephens City Mennonite Church a year and a half ago, when they offered free use of their sanctuary. But when Rhee heard the tragic news that Monday morning, he wasn't sure what their reaction would be. Would they blame him and his 44-member church, or all Korean people?

With a heavy heart, Rhee decided to attend a prayer meeting at Stephens City Mennonite the next morning to share his sorrow and grief over the tragedy that had taken place on the college campus in Blacksburg.

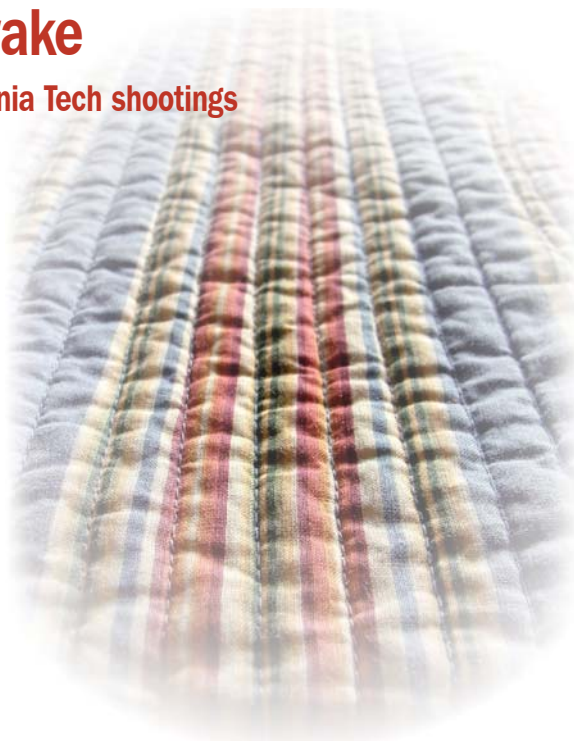
His wife, Sharon, decided to join him. But just as the Rhees started walking over to the church, a short distance from their home, Sharon's feelings of guilt overwhelmed her. She panicked and ran back to the house. "I wanted to attend and pray, but I couldn't," she said.

When James met with the group, he apologized for Cho's actions and shared the emotions he and other members of the Stephens City Korean Community Church, also a Mennonite congregation, were experiencing. "I felt like I wanted to escape from the Korean community because I was so ashamed," James said. "We have a very strong nationalism. We feel like we are one big family."

The next day, the Rhees and other members of the Korean church joined Stephens City Mennonite for a family-night event. That was when members of the two congregations took their dialogue a little deeper. Sharon had finally summoned the courage to share her feelings about the shootings. What she got in return was empathy and words of comfort. "They encouraged me, and they understood my feelings of guilt," she said. "You are part of our family. You are God's family."

The two congregations developed a closer bond as a result of that evening. "I feel the spirit of God was among us in seeking unity," Aldine said. "We learned about ways to respond that bring healing and hope, and that glorify God."

- Adapted from an article appearing in *The Winchester Star*, written by Lorraine Halsted, printed on May 29.



Comforters for the wounded victims

A particular group of students will be facing the stark reality of returning to the campus where they were the victims of a most horrific crime. This past April 16, thirty-three students and faculty were killed at Virginia Tech. The outpouring of support from around the world for their families was truly amazing to witness. Often relegated to a side-bar in this whole story, though, were the twenty-five students at Virginia Tech who survived the shooting, but were wounded, and will be living with that vivid memory for the rest of their lives. Many of those students will be returning to campus this fall to complete their programs.

We at Christiansburg Mennonite Fellowship invite our sisters and brothers of Virginia Conference to help recognize the particular suffering of those wounded students. With your help, we would like to make a comforter for each of those students. We have been in contact with the Dean of Students at Virginia Tech who heartily endorses this effort. The University will take care of distributing the comforters to the affected students. We are not seeking face-to-face contact with the students; they will receive these comforters anonymously, or at the very most, with broad greetings from Virginia Mennonite Conference churches. If your congregation would like to participate by making a comforter, please contact Christiansburg Mennonite Fellowship (540-382-8787) and we will send you further details.

- Les Horning
Christiansburg Mennonite Fellowship

Good \$ense course published in Italian



courtesy Willard & Eva Eberly

Several evangelical publishers in Italy informed us that we have no books on the stewardship of money in Italian. Friends who work in the secular financial setting were not aware of any Italian books designed to help families manage finances. With that in mind, we

began searching among the many English books on the subject to find a practical, but simple study guide that could easily be contextualized for Italy.

Through MMA's "Stewardship University" we discovered Willow Creek's *Good \$ense Budget Course: Biblical Financial Principles for Transforming your Finances and Life* (by Dick Towner and John Tofilon.) They graciously granted VMM a reasonable contract for translation rights. Using the first corrected draft of the translation, Ken Horst taught a "trial run" course among the Mennonite churches in Palermo, Sicily where it was well received.

Casa della Bibbia, widely known and respected Christian publisher in Italy, agreed to publish the book for us, if VMM would finance it. By faith we agreed. They subjected it to thorough correction, contextualization, and careful layout. Daniele Salini, a fine Christian financier and president of an association of Christian Italian professionals and businessmen, highly endorses its content. Here is a translated quote from the introduction he wrote for the Italian version, "Money will have its rightful place when it becomes an instrument that we learn to use in fulfilling God's plan for our lives."

Our son, Jon Michael, added the final touch—an attractively designed cover appropriate for the Italian culture that definitely influences its commercial value. Most of all, let's pray that all that's been invested in this book will yield dividends of transformed lives in the area of finances among the Italian churches.

• Eva Eberly
Mediterranean Regional Assistant

Rally for religious freedom in Rome

"Most Holy Saints Square," several blocks from the notorious Coliseum of ancient Rome, was an appropriate setting for an unusual gathering. Approximately 700 evangelical believers from all over Italy convened there on June 23 to express their desire for more religious freedom.

Organized by the "Italian Evangelical Alliance," this was only the second such event in the history of Italy, the first one having taken place in 1998.

Italy's history is marred by 800 years of religious oppression and persecution. The last four decades of religious freedom have been limited however, by a 1929 fascist law and by a dominant religious system that is strongly linked to the political state.

The "believers' church" movement in Italy, that numbers less than 1% of the population, has been weak and divided with traditionally little influence on the Italian society. This rally demonstrates a new commitment to unified witness and to seek a common identity and platform. Some themes that emerged during the rally: we are already free in Christ; we are not here to protest against something but rather to encourage the cause of religious freedom; we openly declare our prayer support of our government's leaders. A clear call was launched for the legal recognition of evangelical churches, qualifying them to receive tax-deductible gifts, to perform marriages, and other similar rights.

Lia Giuliani and Eva Eberly represented the Mennonite church and were part of a delegation of believers from Bari. A highlight of the rally for them was the radiant testimony of a well-known Italian soccer player who was recently converted and now a leader of "Athletes for Christ" in Italy.



(top) Italian evangelicals at the rally in Rome for more religious freedom in Italy.

(above) Lia Giuliani and Eva Eberly in Rome. They went to the rally representing the Mennonite church in Bari.

courtesy Willard & Eva Eberly

• Eva Eberly
CMediterranean Regional Assistant

FLRC comes home for its 20th anniversary

(right) Ralph Steger, executive director of FLRC, Deb Layman, Gloria Snider, Radella Vrolijk, Rowland Brunk, (all board members), Dorothy Hottle, office manager, and Carroll Hottle celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Family Life Resource Center at Park View Mennonite Church on July 1.

On Sunday afternoon, July 1, the Family Life Resource Center invited friends from everywhere to celebrate its 20th birthday. What made this date—and the place, the Park View Mennonite Church—significant was that it was exactly twenty years earlier, July 1, 1987, that FLRC first opened its doors at that very location, using several office spaces in the south annex of the church.

At the celebration, Jim Glanzer and Harvey Yoder, clinicians at FLRC for most of those years, shared some of their memories, beginning with the coming of Randy and Rhonda Weber, the Center's first therapists and directors. From an agency operating on a shoestring and a prayer, FLRC has grown to one with an annual budget of \$450,000. The Center still relies on lots of prayer and other help to support this Christian-based counseling and resource agency.

Among the early FLRC supporters present at the event were Gloria Lehman, the first chair of the board, and past board member John Drescher, who has become the most widely-read Mennonite writer ever. Drescher, now from Quakertown, Pennsylvania, spoke on the theme "Changes I Have Seen in Family Life and Parenting Over the Last Fifty Years."

At nearly 79, Drescher's message was as strong and impactful as ever. For example, he spoke of five commitments each of us need to make if we are to avoid being seduced by the persuasive media messages constantly being aimed at our children

and families: "I will walk with integrity of heart within my house;" "I will set before my eyes no vile thing;" "I will look with favor on the faithful of the land so that they may live in my house;" "No one who practices deceit shall remain in my house;" "No one who utters lies shall continue in my presence." (from Psalm 101)

Then there was the music. The rich, resonant sound of the fifty-voice adult choir from the First Russian Baptist Church was unforgettable. We all wished for more.

The offering for the event totaled \$1400, all of which will go toward making up some of the difference between what it costs to run the Center (currently with an office and clinical staff of eight FTE) and the reduced amounts often paid by insurance companies and by individuals without health coverage or other means.

An earlier 20th Anniversary fundraiser, a Couples Night Out at Simple Pleasures held May 19, also helped provide some much needed funds for operating expenses, debt reduction and recent building repairs. FLRC now owns its offices on 273 Newman Avenue, and looks forward to paying off its \$90,000 mortgage for the building and its new annex as soon as possible.

The FLRC board and staff appreciate all of the congregations and individuals who have made these twenty good years a reality, and especially thank the local businesses and other generous donors who helped sponsor our 20th anniversary events.

• Harvey Yoder, counselor, FLRC



(at right) Destiny, Hailey, Michael, Essence and Keira work together to build the temple in response to our story about Josiah.

courtesy Tami Nice



The fifth annual Back Yard Bible School in Graham, N.C., was held beside the playground in Parkridge Apartments instead of in Keith and Tami Nice's back yard. Many children live in the apartments there. Average attendance during the week was 45-50 children, ages 3-13. On Wednesday evening there was lots of thunder and lightning, and leaders needed to make a decision about holding an outdoor Bible school in these conditions. A dozen or so kids gathered around and begged, "Please don't cancel Bible school." For safety, it had to be cancelled that evening. The students were eager to participate. It was a great opportunity to begin friendships with families there; future outreaches include a school supply distribution in August.

Connections Prayer Calendar August 2007

Sunday

This month's prayer calendar is sponsored by

Dick and Wanda Good

in honor of their good friends at Riverside Mennonite Church and others in the Harman, West Virginia, community who have made their summer sojourns there memorable and rewarding.

5 Thank God for another Virginia Mennonite Conference Assembly; another time to connect with others, worship, and work on the needs of the church. Pray for the planning process for next year's Assembly in Harrisonburg.

6 The Italian Mennonite Church still waits after more than 20 years for official recognition by the Italian government. Ask the Lord to intervene on their behalf to break through the obstacles.

7 Anita Rhodes, serving as an historical interpreter at Nazareth Village under VMM's *TravSewd* program, leaves for Turkey, to visit her missionary sister, en route to Israel. Pray for traveling mercies.

12 Pray for Victor Espinoza, pastor of Iglesia de Jesus la Promesa (Church of Promise of Jesus), Wallace, N.C., one of our recent church plants, as he reaches out to his neighborhood.

13 Nancy Marshall has returned to Orange Walk Town, Belize, after being in the US for VA Assembly and vacation with her family. Thank God for her energy and creativity as she reaches the Deaf community around her.

14 Youth camp for Jamaica Mennonite Church is held this week. Bible study, activities, and good interaction make this a highlight for those who attend. Ask God to bless the leaders and the youth as they participate together.

Monday

1 Intercede for a youth camp to establish friendships with un-evangelized youth through music, sport activities, and English conversation courses, being held in Niksic, a university city in Montenegro July 30-Aug. 5.

8 A VMM team has been working on rebuilding a church in Haiti since August 3. Thank God for the good connections there, and ask Him to bless the church as it grows.

15 Thank God for the ministry of Myron Augsburg as he retires this month as overseer for the leadership/administration cluster of special ministries. Pray for discernment in finding his successor.

20 Pray blessings over a PIM team from Harrisonburg, Va., Stan McMahons (Ireland), and Maurita Eberly as they help provide meaningful activities for this vacation/seminar.

21 Richard and Margaret Keeler now live nearer to the Gospel Lighthouse Menn. Church where they give leadership to this congregation of 80 members. Ask God to bless them as they have more contact with this home community.

27 VMC's four elected officers, plus the conference minister and conference coordinator, will meet in Richmond tomorrow to prepare for the Conference Council meeting on September 21. Pray for wisdom and guidance.

28 The VMC staff and a representative of the Listening Committee will meet tomorrow to evaluate the Hickory 2007 Assembly. Pray for discernment as they seek to improve these gatherings.

Wednesday

2 Kerry-Ann Tyrell and Lisa Reid, youth from Jamaica, attended Youth Camp in Trinidad last weekend and travel home tomorrow. Thank God for this opportunity for them, and ask for His guidance as they continue to serve Him through their congregations.

9 Pray for Conference Minister Owen Burkholder as he walks with various districts and special ministry clusters in the transitions of bishops/overseers.

16 Phil, Marcia, Crystal Lehman and Christopher Lehman returned to their home in Italy yesterday. Their home leave was full of church visits and family times. Ask God to bless their transition time with insight and energy.

23 Pray for Aaron and Laura Kauffman, VMM and MMN workers in Colombia, as they reach out to a variety of people as they teach English, relate to the church youth group, and interact with community members.

30 Both VMC and VMM end their fiscal years tomorrow. Both began the month in deficit positions in their general operating accounts. Pray that God's people may respond generously to the financial need.

Thursday

3 At 7:00 p.m. today, the 2007 class of *TravSewd* will be commissioned for their terms of service. What a challenge ahead of each one! With your presence and God's constant prayers, they will do the work set before them.

10 The Annual General Meeting of the Mennonite Church of Trinidad & Tobago begins today. Pray for the church as they have their business session on Saturday, and the celebration with worship on Sunday.

17 Praise God for answers to prayer for the Chris Riddle family. A suitable, adequate apartment was found for them near Centro Koinonia, a developing area of Bari, Italy.

24 Paul Kratz, Trinidad, meets monthly with pastors and leadership teams in the Mennonite Church of Trinidad & Tobago. May God's grace and insight be shared through him and good decisions be made for the wellbeing of the church.

31 Thank God for Sarah Bixler's work as interim youth minister on this, her last day at work for the Conference. Pray for discernment for VMC leaders in the search for her successor.

Friday

4 Many of us take a yearly summer vacation this month. Pray we may be open to God's leadings in our lives during the coming year and that we may learn to rest in Him and just "be."

11 Pray for Conference Minister Owen Burkholder's ministry of encouraging the churches of VMC. He preaches at Zion Mennonite Church, in Broadway, Va., tomorrow.

18 Teachers, principals, parents and students are preparing for a new school year. Let's pray that they will have good attitudes and open minds to learn a lot about God's world.

25 The Hickory Hmong Mennonite Church celebrates their third anniversary today. Pray for the pastor, Chaiya Hadtasunern, and his congregation, that they may grow in numbers and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

If you would like to sponsor the prayer calendar, please contact Gloria Lehman at (540) 434-9727 or email gloria.lehman@vmmissions.org

Saturday

Announcements

The annual **Ministry Retreat** for pastors/ministers will be held February 22-24, 2008, at the Williamsburg Christian Retreat Center. David Brubaker, assistant professor at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, will be the resource person. His topic will be "Managing Conflict in the Congregation." Mark your calendars now!

"**Women of Worth—WOW!**" is the topic for the Mennonite Women of Virginia's annual retreat November 9-11 at Holiday Inn Koger South Hotel in Richmond. Angie Williams is the speaker for this dynamic event. Watch for registration information in church mailboxes this summer. Plan to join women in your congregation and from all around Virginia Mennonite Conference for worship and fellowship.

Promote Penny Power in your congregation with a new three-minute DVD, "The Three Littlest Missionaries" about the children of Chris and Melody Riddle, mission workers in Bari, Italy. Funds from Penny Power raised this year will assist the childrens' valuable relational ministry. Contact Laura for a DVD at (800) 707-5535 or laura.campbell@vmmissons.org.

2007

PENNY POWER

Your pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and dollars make a difference!

We are hoping to raise \$25,000 for this year's *Penny Power* projects. In 2006, congregations contributed **\$26,873.32!** We hope to continue the effort and momentum from last year.

- Highlight *Penny Power* during your Sunday morning worship service. Involve the children in your church.
- Bring jugs from your church/org. to the Relief Sale, October 5-6, at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds.
- Take your empty jugs back to your church and start collecting for next year's *Penny Power* projects!

Enjoy the scenic Shenandoah Valley

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Bike Shenandoah 2007

September 22, 2007

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