



CALLED TO RACIAL JUSTICE

VMC Introduces Racial Justice Initiative and Task Force

Delegates Vote to Adopt VMC Strategic Plan

Pastoral leaders Share How They are Navigating the Pandemic

Christian Camps Highlight This Season's Camps and Retreats

Can We Do This?

“Unless the seed falls to the ground and dies, it is only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” —John 12:24

By RICHARD K. EARLY

In the weeks leading up to the Winter Delegate Session on February 6, I asked numerous persons what they thought of the Strategic Plan and the Racial Justice Initiative.

Some said the plans were too vague and others felt we were taking on too much too quickly; yet most were cautiously supportive of both. One asked the question, “Do you think we can do this?”

Knowing this question had been asked before, I responded “Yes,” and I shared the following story.

It became apparent soon after occupying our new facility in 2000 that Grace Mennonite Fellowship was again in need of more space. At our annual church planning retreat on January 31, 2004, members of the church that were present came up with both a plan and an initiative to build on to the existing building on their own.

Almost everyone present affirmed the vision to triple the size of the facility. I agreed that the space was greatly needed; however, I asked whether we could afford it—with still owing \$25,000 on the existing building. Immediately, one of the members stood up and said, “Pastor, I mean no disrespect, but that debt has been taken care of as of this moment. You keep leading us with God’s word and let us take care of the church building project.”

From then on, the seed was planted in fertile soil. On June 4, 2006, a 12,000 square foot addition was dedicated. In 2019, the \$375,000 debt was retired.

I share that story to point out that we have, as Virginia Mennonite Conference,

overwhelmingly approved both the Racial Justice Initiative and the Strategic Plan. We now own it.

With ownership comes the responsibility to implement the options that are before us. The challenges I see ahead of us are tied to the John 12:24 passage quoted above. This is my paraphrase: “A seed is nothing more than a seed if it is not planted in the soil.” I see the seed as the vote we took at our Winter Delegate Session. Now the seed must be planted. It is our responsibility to take the mandate that you and I have affirmed and be the planters.

No seed, initiative, or plan can grow and move forward until the soil receives it. I see the eight districts and sixty-seven congregations as the soil where our Racial Justice Initiative and Strategic Plan must take root.

Knowing that no seed is capable of producing fruit until it is planted, my hope is that district leaders and their congregations must begin to get excited about the possibilities that the Racial Justice Initiative and the Strategic Plan offer to us to grow.

Those who worked hard to craft and shape the multiple options and visions are to be commended. Thank you for the seeds of your labor. Will planting these seeds, these goals, force us out of our comfort zone? Absolutely!

It’s spring! Let the planting begin and let God water and bring the harvest these next five years.

Richard K. Early



Pastoral transitions

DECEMBER 2020 TO APRIL 2021

Noah Helmuth, 96, April 12, 1924—January 12, 2021.

John R. Martin, 92, September 2, 1928—March 23, 2021.

Richard Bowman, former Central District Oversight Leader, transfer to retired status.

Regina Brubaker, ended assignment at Weavers Mennonite Church.

Owen Burkholder, former interim pastor at Lindale Mennonite Church, Linville, Va., transfer to retired status.

Bonita Stutzman, former interim co-pastor at Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., transfer to retired status.

Ervin Stutzman, former interim co-pastor at Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., transfer to retired status.

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Learn More

Find the **Racial Justice and Equality Overview** and **VMC Strategic Plan** under “Conference Council” at virginiacommunity.org/resources/

VMC Introduces Racial Justice Task Force

By JON TROTTER

How can Virginia Mennonite Conference lead in a way that fully includes people of color and non-dominant cultures in all aspects of the decision-making process? How can VMC equip leaders and members of its congregations to deeply listen to stories from non-White voices without defensive postures, and to include those who have been shut out of power structures by understanding the history and making room for other seats at the table?

As racial justice and inclusion is a priority for Virginia Conference, a Racial Justice Task Force was approved by Conference Council in September 2020 and formed with eight persons, representing a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds and different geographic regions. To learn more about each Task Force member, go to virginiainconference.org/racial-justice-task-force/.

What Virginia Mennonite Conference hopes to achieve through a task force:

- To equip members of our congregations to form inter-racial and inter-cultural friendships in their community.
- To learn about the level of racism that exists within Virginia Mennonite Conference, an Anabaptist/Mennonite culture, and the patterns within our organization that limits non-White participation at all levels of leadership.
- To develop leadership strategies to address the racism that contributes to non-White individuals from excelling among us.
- To equip Conference leaders, credentialed leaders, and lay congregational leaders in understanding and addressing issues of racism that impacts their ministries.

The work of the Task Force involves assessing VMC's history concerning race relationships and providing a written report of their findings to Conference Council and the delegate assembly. There are stories of positive and negative actions by leaders and members concerning race relationships which need to be heard. This may be where deep listening occurs by a group



of people, but these stories can also be recorded and shared with our constituency. Then the Task Force will make specific recommendations to Conference Council to eliminate racist language from Conference documents and policies at all levels of the organization, and advocate to include non-White members on Conference planning committees on personnel selection for all committee appointments. They will also make recommendations concerning governance practice within VMC to incorporate non-White leaders.

Training programs in racial sensitivity, racial consciousness, and anti-racism and inclusion will be facilitated by the Task Force for Conference staff, Conference Council, and Conference Commissions. All key leaders of Conference and credentialed leaders will be required to take the Intercultural Cultural Development Inventory and trained in racial sensitivity, racial consciousness, and anti-racism and inclusion. The Task Force will ask each VMC congregation to provide training on these topics using materials and training programs recommended by the Task Force.

Virginia Conference is also seeking a Racial Justice and Equality Leader as a quarter-time staff person who will lead and facilitate Virginia Mennonite Conference's Anti-Racism mandates in an initial two-year assignment.

Jon Trotter is Communication Manager for Virginia Mennonite Conference.

BY THE NUMBERS Winter Delegate Session February 6, 2021

ATTENDANCE

# Total registered	115
# Total attended	104
# Delegates attended	94
# Total known delegates	185
40% needed for quorum	74

Out of 69 congregations,
42 were represented.

DELEGATE ACTIONS

- 2020 Summer Assembly minutes passed at 100% (91 yes, 0 no)
- Appointment of Chris Johnson to VMissions board passed at 100% (94 yes, 0 no)
- By-law proposal passed at 97% (91 yes, 2 no)
- Strategic Plan passed at 91% (85 yes, 8 no)

*All who voted were eligible to vote.
Vote tallies include email votes.*

Delegates Vote to Adopt VMC Strategic Plan

By JON TROTTER

During Winter Delegate Session, held virtually on February 6, 2021, delegates voted to adopt the proposed Virginia Mennonite Conference Strategic Plan as presented, after having had the opportunity to discuss the proposed in breakout groups, focusing on the ways in which the Strategy Plan elicits excitement, and discussing ways to live into the plan. The vote tally was 91% affirmative, with 85 delegates voting yes and eight voting no.

While members of Conference Council recognized that our Strategic Plan process occurred during the coronavirus pandemic, there has been excitement that the Strategic Plan provides a framework for launching VMC's faith communities into a strategic effort to be the people of God.

Now that delegates have voted to adopt it, the next steps will involve VMC Staff and District Ministers developing an Action Plan to implement the goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan (March to May 2021), followed over the next five years by Strategic Plan implementation by congregational leaders (July 2021 to June 2025), with annual monitoring and an evaluation at the end of the implementation period.

The Strategic Plan establishes five priority goals for the next five years (2021-2025) to achieve VMC's mission and vision, each with specific objectives:

1. To renew relationships with God, each other, and creation
2. To engage in missional outreach
3. To support leaders and multiple modes of ministry while adapting to new realities.
4. To hear the voices and welcome the leadership of people of color, the differently-abled, women, and youth.
5. To provide mutual aid or counsel to struggling congregations

Members of the Task Force met with all eight districts in the conference, as well with partner agency heads and business leaders. After collecting the input from the listening sessions, the task force presented five themes to delegates at the Winter Delegate Session on February 1, 2020. Based on additional feedback from delegates and further discernment, the Task Force presented a draft to Conference Council on May 16. With additional comments from Conference Council, the Task Force revised the document and presented a final draft to Conference Council on June 30, 2020.

At Conference Assembly, meeting virtually on July 18, 2020, delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference met in random breakout groups to discuss the Strategic Plan and subsequently voted to receive it. Districts were given the task of reviewing the Strategic Plan and provide written feedback to the Executive Conference Minister by November 30, 2020. The Executive Conference Minister reviewed the feedback and made some edits based on district feedback. David Brubaker, serving as consultant to the process, received the feedback, the proposed edits, and validated the edits as being consistent with the district feedback.

Conference Council members received the edited Strategic Plan and briefly reviewed it at their December 17, 2020, meeting. At the January 21, 2021, Conference Council meeting, the members affirmed the edits and recommended the Strategic Plan be presented to the delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Strategic Plan Task Force members were: James Akerson, Deb Horst, Moriah Hurst, Armando Sanchez, and Clyde Kratz, with David Brubaker serving as consultant to the process. (Pearl Hartman and Aldine Musser served on the task force during the spring sabbaticals of both Deb Horst and Moriah Hurst.)

Jon Trotter is Communication Manager for Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Re-Envisioning the Conference

By HARVEY YODER

Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) was formed in 1835 by former members of Lancaster Mennonite Conference who had moved into Shenandoah and Page Valleys from Pennsylvania.

I first became an official member of this branch of the Mennonite Church after graduating from Eastern Mennonite College,

which was then a VMC school, and a year after being employed as a teacher and dean of boys at



Eastern Mennonite High School. In 1965 I was asked to serve as an assistant pastor of Zion Mennonite Church near Broadway on a marginal time basis, and it was then that I officially moved my membership to VMC.

I had no seminary training at the time and was only 25 years old, but felt honored to have been invited to join the Zion family and its affiliated Mennonite congregations, one with many rising young leaders in my age group.

Last Saturday, over 55 years later, I took part in VMC's winter delegate session, along with over 100 fellow pastors and other congregational representatives. It was a well-planned and inspirational event, where we heard moving stories by some of our members of color who further convicted us of our need to repent of the latent racism we have been guilty of condoning and even perpetrating throughout the church's history. Having to meet via Zoom, though, we missed the camaraderie and the kind of "family reunion" feel of our normal conference sessions.

Recalling my many years good years as a part of VMC, I again felt sadness over the number of congregations who have left

Re-Envisioning continued on page 5

our Conference due to differences they had with the rest of VMC and with the national Mennonite Church USA. Meanwhile I have also mourned the steady number of individuals and households leaving VMC congregations and joining other churches in our community.

Like many older denominations, VMC has an increasingly aging membership. As I looked over the gallery of participants in Saturday's session I saw no teens and very few adults under 30 among them, not a hopeful sign for the church's future. We were also told that the pool of potential pastors for congregations seeking trained leaders has been shrinking drastically, another disturbing sign.

Maybe it's time for a radical rethinking of how we do church. For one thing, might we need a new name? We have been planting churches in West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky for years now, so we are not just about one state. And while I value the term "Mennonite," it also conjures up images for some that may not be positive. Also, the word "conference" may suggest a kind of bureaucratic organization rather than a living and loving organism that embodies the presence of the loving and living Christ in the world.

So how might something like "South-Atlantic Family of Anabaptist-Minded

Congregations" sound? Interestingly, Dutch Mennonites have long been known as "Dooptgezinde," or "Baptism-minded," as in representing free churches whose members belong by choice rather than by their being christened by their parents as infants.

This kind of name change should be accompanied by a less centralized, top-down form of administration and suggest a fellowship of self-governing congregations collaborating with each other for purposes of fellowship, support, outreach and discipleship. There could and should also be more focus on providing mentoring and training for developing pastoral and other leadership roles from within congregations rather than relying on hiring professionally trained pastors from elsewhere.

In my mind, this would be one of the best ways to increase participation and a sense of commitment to the local congregation, that is by intentionally providing lots of apprentice leadership opportunities for all members from the time of their baptism. These opportunities for learning by doing could include people of all ages and from all walks of life bringing Sunday morning messages, for example, always with coaching and mentoring help offered by those with more training and experience. In this way, Sunday morning and other church gatherings would be more like cel-

ebrative "carry-in meals" rather than well-orchestrated "buffets" prepared by a special team of professional chefs.

In short, we need to think creatively and boldly about how to not only create new wineskins—as in making some structural or organizational changes—but to pray together for an infusion of new wine and new life in our congregations, starting from the ground up in each of our local congregations. These newly energized and re-envisioned congregations should then reach out to invite, and re-invite, other Anabaptist-minded congregations around them to friendship with them as they seek to follow the way of Jesus together.

I believe we may be enriched most by not simply allying with other Christ-following, Sermon-on-the-Mount heeding congregations who are most like us, but with communities of believers who are also in some ways unlike us.

In every way possible we need to be an answer to Jesus' final, heartfelt prayer, "That they may all be one, as I and my Father are one," and in this way having communities of Jesus followers becoming outposts of heaven right here on planet earth.

E pluribus unum.

Harvey Yoder is a pastor with Family of Hope, Harrisonburg, Va., and a licensed counselor.

A Chance To Do Church and Life Differently

By ANDREW CHEUNG

Pandemic life has afforded my wife and I more time to enjoy walking and hiking together. Though Julia would be just as happy to return to a favorite trail, if a prospective route involves elevation changes, scrambling over rocks and is adjacent to water, then that trail goes to the top of the list. Rarely, do we go back to the same trail if there is a new trail yet to be explored.

So when unexpected circumstances like the pandemic arrive, I'm naturally energized by new opportunities to do church differently (learn how to live-stream, anyone?), to enjoy a new meal (instagram recipes have become my tutor of novelty rather than eating out), and to connect with people (Zoom meetings mean goodbye to scheduling coffee meetings months in advance, long commutes and fighting for parking). I

also feel a bit guilty because my role as a parent supporting my children in their schooling is nowhere near as challenging as that of parents of toddlers and elementary-school-aged children.

During the pandemic, Julia and I have enjoyed an unexpected season of temporary empty-nesting. Our daughter went off to college as a freshman and our high-school sophomore son went back to Vancouver, Canada (our home for most of our lives) last summer "until school returned to in-person learning." Well, it's now

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Andrew, Julia, Ashley and Evan Cheung. Courtesy photo

Chance continued from page 5

April and he only returned to be with us in Washington, DC last month... and it's not because in-person learning is starting up. We decided that eight months of empty-nested life was too extravagant for us. We needed some more hardship so bringing our hormonal teenager back into the fold was part of the solution. Oh, and we miss him and love him dearly, of course.

For those who are seething with envy as you read, you'll be happy to know that our guilty pandemic life is not completely challenge-free. Like many who have discovered the freedoms of working remotely (and its associated benefits of rolling out of bed to hop on a Zoom meeting in your comfy clothes five minutes before meeting start-time), pandemic life has its drawbacks. Ease

of access to your workstation means work's easy access to you. When Julia hops on the computer to respond to a work message, it's easy for me to do the same. Soon, we find ourselves fitting in an extra two hours of work. Doing pastoral care behind screens or masks with no-contact may be effective for physical care, but it feels far from being effective in spiritual and emotional care.

Pandemic life also simultaneously highlighted issues of healthcare equity, police reform, racism against African-Americans and Asian-Americans and the ugly rise of Christian Nationalism. Like many other pastors, we've had to learn how to advocate for public health policies, anti-racist initiatives and sift out the expressions of our faith that align more with a particular view of American culture than the culture of God's kingdom.

Finding bandwidth and true restfulness has required diligence and grace on my part—diligence to say it's ok to park my work and trust God to do God's work and grace to say that everyone has a different story that they are figuring out in light of God's grace.

Whether you feel guilt, grief or gloom for all that pandemic life has brought, I take solace in the truth that there is Someone who is not surprised or overwhelmed by all of this. We remember the sacrifice and the hope of Jesus, especially during Holy Week, who comes to make all things new in Him. Guilty, grief and gloom do not have the final say. Jesus does. And He says, "It is finished," even when it doesn't feel that way to us.

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

Starting a New Pastorate During the Pandemic

By STEPHEN "TIG" INTAGLIATA

My wife Karen and I made the decision to move from Ohio to Northern Virginia in the fall of 2019, after I would retire from my role as Campus Pastor at Bluffton University in May 2020. Our primary reason for the move was to be closer to our son Andrew and his family, and our plan was to purchase a house where we could all live under the same roof.

When the pandemic gripped the country in March 2020, we had just begun looking at houses, and Andrew ended up being the only one who could actually see the houses in person. The rest of us would look for our new home on websites and FaceTime. We're grateful that we were able to find a house that fit our needs and our budget, especially in a tight real estate market.

It wasn't until after we decided to move that the opportunity to serve as pastor of Daniels Run Peace Church came into the picture. Right about the time that the pandemic hit, I saw an ad for the position in the Mennonite periodicals, but I brushed it off at first. I was looking forward to a slower-paced life in retirement, with more time to travel to visit family and friends across the U.S. and around the world.

At about the same time, my pastor in Ohio, who knew that we were moving to the DC area, told me about an opening at Daniels Run Peace Church in Fairfax. She had

a connection with the congregation, and encouraged me to apply, saying "They're a great group of people and I think that you might be a good fit for the congregation." She also mentioned my name to the chair of the search committee.

After some prayerful consideration, I decided to contact the congregation via email to express my interest in the position. Right after I hit "send," an email from the search committee chair appeared in my inbox, asking if I would consider applying for the job. Our messages literally crossed in cyberspace! I took this serendipitous timing as a nudging from God to open myself up a little more to the idea of pursuing this opportunity and postponing my retirement for a little while longer.

Since we were now in the pandemic, all of my meetings with the search committee and the congregation took place via phone or Zoom, including my "visit" to preach and worship with them. When the church extended the invitation to become their next pastor, I hadn't yet met anyone in the congregation face-to-face (and I also hadn't known anyone previously—kind of surprising when you've been part of the Mennonite world as long as I have!)

After having the summer to get settled into our new home and catch a glimpse of retirement life, I began my pastoral role last September. It definitely has not been ideal to start as a pastor in the middle of a pandemic, when the majority of contact

with church members has been virtual. For an extrovert like myself, it's been especially challenging.

One thing that helped in getting acquainted with the members of Daniels Run Peace Church was the chance to meet up with family units outdoors, either at their homes or in a local restaurant. With those who didn't feel comfortable doing this, we set up Zoom gatherings for lunch or coffee.

Since we are a small congregation, our worship services during most of the pandemic have been open for those who feel comfortable attending, but the majority of the members have chosen to worship via Zoom. While we have missed all being together in person, one of the blessings of virtual worship has been the participation of former members of the congregation who have moved away from the area.

I'm grateful that for this year's Easter Sunday, most of us were able to be together for an outdoor service. It was a beautiful day outside, and the joy of celebrating Jesus' resurrection was compounded by the joy of worshipping together in person. As the pandemic continues to subside, I look forward to regularly being able to worship, sing, fellowship and break bread together with our new church family.

Stephen "Tig" Intagliata is Pastor of Daniels Run Peace Church, Fairfax, Va.

Veronica and Armando Sanchez serve as pastors of Iglesia Enciende Una Luz, Harrisonburg, Va., and as church planters of Iglesia Shalom in Waynesboro, Va., serving with Virginia Mennonite Missions.

VMMissions photo

Pastores navegan por la pandemia / Pastors Navigate the Pandemic



Por/By VERONICA SANCHEZ

Como navegamos con la pandemia?

Mi esposo y yo como Pastores de dos congregaciones, navegamos de una manera que no afectara nuestra salud física y emocional, aunque tuvimos momentos de ansiedad, estres y frustracion.

Aprendimos a manejar la tecnología, para poder seguir predicando la Palabra de Dios a las congregaciones, algunas en las que navegamos fueron:

1. Cancelar los servicios presenciales.
2. Reducir los servicios de tres que se tenían por semana a dos.
3. Reducir el tiempo de los servicios.
4. Transmisiones en las plataformas de Facebook Live y Zoom.
5. Los servicios se realizaban desde nuestra casa.
6. Participaron todos nuestros hijos en los servicios (lo cual fue una bendición).

Como encontramos tiempos de refrigerio?

Salir a caminar a las montañas, respirar al aire libre y la frescura del sereno de la noche, escuchar música, orar, leer la biblia con nuestros hijos, juegos de mesa (Monopoly) ver una buena película de la vida real que edificara nuestras vidas, con toda la familia y una buena bandeja de palomitas.

Que dinámicas en particular causaron estres en la casa?

La dinámica cambio considerablemente, todos nuestros hijos regresaron a casa de sus universidades, por el cierre de las escuelas, tuvimos tiempos de frustracion, por el nuevo acoplamiento de estar todos todo el dia juntos, se volvía en ocasiones un caos. Cocinar demasiado, limpieza de casa, los gastos aumentaron por el consumo de todas las utilidades y comida.

Que extrañamos mas?

El ruido de nuestros hijos, ya que todos volvieron a sus universidades, y nuestra hija mayor se caso en medio de la pandemia. Ahora nos vemos con poca frecuencia debido a las distancias, las actividades que cada uno tenemos en la vida diaria. Extranamos los tiempos juntos con nuestros hijos, las risas, bromas y las memorias que construimos en este tiempo difícil de pandemia, pero bendecido por la oportunidad de pasar tanto tiempo juntos.

How did we navigate the pandemic?

As pastors of two congregations, my husband and I navigated the pandemic in a way that did not affect our physical and emotional health, even though we had moments of anxiety, stress and frustration.

We learned how to handle technology, to be able to continue preaching the Word of God to the congregations. Some of the things that we adapted to were the following:

1. Cancel face-to-face services.
2. Reduce the services from three per week to two.
3. Reduce the length of services.
4. Begin transmissions on Facebook Live and Zoom platforms.
5. The services were carried out from our house.
6. All of our children participated in the services (which was a blessing).

How did we find times for refreshment?

We found times for refreshment by going for a walk in the mountains, breathe in the fresh air and enjoy the freshness of the serene night, listen to music, pray, read the bible with our children, play board games (Monopoly), watch a good movie that would be edifying with the whole family and a good bucket of popcorn.

What particular dynamics caused stress in the house?

The dynamics changed considerably as all of our children returned home from their universities, due to the closure of schools. We had times of frustration, due to adapting to being all together all day, which sometimes became chaotic. We had to cook more, keep the house clean, and all of these made our expenses increase as utilities and food went up.

What do we miss the most?

Now we miss the noise of our children at home, as they all returned to their universities, and our oldest daughter got married in the middle of the pandemic. Now we don't see each other that often because of the distance and the activities that each of us have in our daily life. We miss the times together with our children, the laughs, the jokes and the memories we built during the difficult time of the pandemic, but we feel very blessed by the opportunity we had to spend so much time together.

VMC Youth Council Nurtures Young Leaders

By MARK HARMON

Did you know that for over three years a significant part of every conference youth retreat has been planned and led by high school students? The Virginia Mennonite Youth Council is a group of youth workers and high school students that are committed to uniting youth from various congregations in worship and fellowship. We also are excited to explore how we give youth a voice into our conference and welcome them into places like delegate assemblies.

The vision for this group came from a small gathering of youth workers that wanted to change the narrative of ministering to youth into a process of ministering *with* youth. We believe that our students are the church of today, not just tomorrow, and we wanted to invite them to use their gifts for the glory of God in the service of others right now.

We asked students from our congregations that had a gift for leadership, planning, or service to take the jump with us. They in turn suggested peers from different congregations, and soon we had nine students representing seven churches joining our four youth workers.

We scheduled our first junior high retreat and invited any and every Mennonite church to join us. In our planning meetings, the youth workers equipped students on procedure, how you plan a retreat, and what to pay attention to.

The students taught me how to be bold in using your gifts, how to go beyond expectations for something you care about, and how far a servant heart will take you.

Since our formation, we have planned and led three junior high retreats, one senior high retreat, and we planned the 2020 senior high retreat that had to be canceled just days before the event, due to covid-19.

In all of these events I have seen students lead worship, share Scripture, organize their peers, and generally jump into ministry with an energy I wish I had.

I have seen them plan schedules, meals, and worship services. I have joined them in praying for the people who will be attending our events.

Working with the Youth Council has been a joyful part of youth ministry. It continues to show me that students are capable of being more than just consumers.

As youth workers, we walk with students, mentor them, and empower them. There are anxieties about leading, and confusion about how to do it, but willingness to serve and faithfulness to God continue to prevail.

When we asked the students to pick a guiding verse, they quickly chose Matthew 20:26-28, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.”

Multiple people asked me why we didn't choose the 1 Timothy verse about not letting people look down on you because of your age. It seems so fitting for youth that are rising up to lead. I love those verses, but the Youth Council's main focus isn't getting people to take youth seriously, it's serving our communities with the love of Christ.

As I look to the future I am filled with hope about how this council can grow and flourish. Obviously a global pandemic has changed how we can gather, but even now we are planning what events will be possible this fall.

Having students give insight about the needs of their peers and how they are experiencing covid-19 continues to be a crucial tool in deciding how we do ministry. We continue to reach out to congregations and invite them to nominate a high school student to represent them.

I would love to see our council grow to better represent our Conference as a whole. Doing that will enable us to give better insight to the Conference about the experience, hopes, and concerns of our young people in church today.

I welcome your prayers for our ministry, and look forward to following Jesus together into where this adventure leads.

Mark Harmon is VMC Youth Council Chair and Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church, Va.



Grants Available to VMC Ministers and Workers

Did you know that various grants are available through Virginia Mennonite Conference to pastors and others?

Ministry Training Trust Funds can assist ministers who are active members of Virginia Mennonite Conference congregations. This financial assistance for persons such as pastors, congregational lay leaders, mission workers, post-high youth sensing a call to Christian ministry, and others can help pay for education and training from a qualified and certified institution.

The Church Worker Assistance Program is a grant for licensed counseling services available to eligible church or agency workers, dependent on funding available through an endowment managed by Virginia Mennonite Conference. Prerequisite: Applicants must have membership in a VMC congregation and the approval process must be done in advance of services being rendered.

The Retired Church Worker Aid and Enrichment Fund is a program to provide some financial assistance for eligible retired church, agency or mission workers, or their surviving spouse, due to financial hardship for either aid or enrichment purposes.

Learn more and find applications to all of these grants at virginiaconference.org/resources/ under Grants.



Young campers at Highland Retreat enjoy a hike during summer camp in 2019. Photos courtesy of Highland Retreat



Campers embark on a nature study during summer camp in 2019.

Celebrating the Possible at Highland Retreat

By RACHEL MILLER

It's all too easy to dwell on restrictions and limitations, especially in a year like this one. But, starting more than a year ago—well before we realized how much and how long Highland's operations would be impacted by COVID-19—the year-round staff at Highland Retreat began deliberately choosing to focus on what was possible.

Again and again, we'd look at restrictions and say to each other: So we can't do things the way we normally would right now; what *can* we do?

Last summer, we couldn't hold summer youth camps, but we could (and did) offer some special programming for individual families. Last fall, we couldn't hold a fundraiser banquet with our annual meeting, but we could (and did) enjoy interactions with the Highland community through unique drive-thru events. This winter, we couldn't host many of our usual guest groups due to group size limitations, but we could (and did) pour our energy into a number of special donor-funded projects in our facilities.

Now, even as the pandemic situation is easing, we know we can't simply leap back into the spring and summer season we were expecting to have last year. So what *can* we do?

This spring, Highland Retreat is offering special activities for families and individuals on five Saturdays (April 10 to May 8). These "Highland Days" events are

a great opportunity for people to come out and spend a day on the Highland grounds with some friends. There's a wide variety of available activities each Saturday, so there is truly something for everyone.

Younger families may want to tour the summer camp area with program director Dean Williams, enjoy a nature activity led by Highland staff, or hike the perimeter trail while working on the exciting "Birdhouse Breakout" challenge (solve puzzles and complete tasks at a series of birdhouses to collect the clues).

Other individuals may prefer to check out the renovations at Green Valley House, take a birdwatching walk with local experts, play a round of disc golf, or enjoy a limited-seating fundraiser dinner.

All participants are very welcome to spend a few hours on a service project that will help prepare Highland for the summer season! The tasty lunch that our food service staff will prepare is free for those who volunteer. Additional activities and more details can be found at highlandretreat.org/highland-days/ (Participants are required to sign up in advance for Highland Days events.)

This summer, Highland Summer Camps are on the schedule! We're offering eight different youth camp programs in June and July, for children ages 5 to 16.

These camps won't be exactly the same as in past years—for example, cabin

groups won't interact with each other quite as much and face coverings are likely to be required at least part of the time—but they will provide some of the traditional outdoor activities, worship times, and camp fun that are essential parts of the Highland Summer Camp experience.

In addition, we're keeping some of the family programming we offered last summer; families are invited to enjoy some special experiences at Highland during four specific weekends, from Memorial Day weekend to early August.

Various participation levels are possible, so families can choose to jump into a fully-programmed Family Camp, or enjoy a relaxing Family Weekend with just a few extra planned elements. All the summer details and the online registration forms can be found at highlandretreat.org/summer-camp/

We invite you to join us in embracing what is possible in this season, whether that means participating in Highland Days or Highland Summer Camps, or just shifting your own personal focus at home. Highland Retreat staff have witnessed the many ways that God can surprise us with unexpected grace and provision this year, when all we have been doing is looking for what's possible and doing our best to serve in whatever ways we can.

Impacting Youth and Families in Faith at WCRC

By GINGER SOUTH

Are you seeking rest, renewal, and reconnection with the Holy Spirit? You're welcome at the Williamsburg Christian Retreat Center! Now, more than ever, people are seeking peace. Our mission is to provide a place for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of kids and adults through camping and retreats. In this next season at the retreat center, we are delighted to offer summer camp, family camp, and family reunions as ways to help you re-order the chaos of life.

Summer Camp at WCRC is a safe, Christ-centered, and fun program for youth aged 6-18. Camp invites kids into a relationship with Jesus Christ by sharing the gospel, teaching biblical truths, and encouraging them to share Jesus's love in their communities. Why does camp impact kids so much? We think it's because God's creation, God's word, and God's people combine to create the perfect atmosphere where the Holy Spirit transforms hearts.

Last year, we converted our six-week overnight summer camp to four weeks of day camp with a full-time cleaning crew, physically distanced cabin families, and daily temperature and symptom checks for staff, campers, and parents. Through God's grace and all these efforts, none of our campers or camp staff got COVID last summer.

This year, people are eager to send their kids back to summer camp. We're already at the total enrollment of camp 2020 with two more months to go before camp starts. This summer, camp at WCRC will be six weeks and overnight once again. We're hiring staff now and excited to see what the Lord



Activities abound at WCRC. Photos courtesy of Ginger South

will do with these increased opportunities for ministry.

As all WCRC staff alumni will tell you, the last week of camp here is Family Camp, a fantastic end to the summer. Family Camp (August 8-11, 2021) is specifically designed to help families relax, be refreshed, and re-connect with each other and with God. Spending quality time in a distraction-free environment is essential



for families to explore deeper relationship with God and each other. We want families to leave with renewed excitement to do life together. Family Campers enjoy:

Fun activities and recreation options: archery, swimming, canoeing, zip lining, and tree climbing are just some of the activities that add the outdoor context where family memories are made. Activities for different age groups run simultaneously so that no one is left out of the fun!

Worship times and devotions to help families focus on God: Songs and messages each day give families a spiritual focal point. Part of the Family Camp schedule is daily family devotions where we provide a devotion book that you can use as a guide.

Great food: Our meals are freshly prepared and served take-out style so families can take them wherever they want. Every meal can be a picnic, an in-cabin munch, or provision for an adventure hike on-grounds.

Options to extend their stay to explore and play in Williamsburg: Families can stay at WCRC after Family Camp ends and launch into many surrounding attractions including Busch Gardens, Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown.

This year has been a challenging one for many families. That's why family connection is more important than ever. In addition to Family Camp, we're also offering space for families to hold summer getaways and reunions in cabins, cottages, campsites, and hotel rooms.

Onsite activities to enjoy include disc golf, spacious outdoor playgrounds, tennis, soccer, basketball, volleyball, gaga ball pits, and an outdoor pool (open Memorial Day through Labor Day). Families up for an adventure can hike or bike miles of nature trails and visit the Learning Tree, our wetlands wildlife viewing area. Campfire rings aplenty make for perfect evening s'mores spots. We want to create a space where families feel safe, cared for, free to relax, and free to let their sense of adventure wander.

Wherever you spend your summer, we wish you the best and pray that Christ will remind you daily of your need for him, making you increasingly more dependent on his unending mercy.

Ginger South is Support Staff Coordinator at Williamsburg Christian Retreat Center, Toano, Va.



Turmoil and Awakening

What do the Acts of the Apostles, Anabaptists of the 16th century, and our current pandemic have in common? Turmoil!

The old is passing away and something new is unfolding. The good news of each of these events is worth noting.

The Acts of the Apostles records passionate followers of Jesus awakening to living into the way of Jesus Christ everywhere they went. Their fearless engagement and experiences of persecution forged the way of Jesus that shook the foundations of culture and reshaped civilization. They met in homes, shared meals together, and offered mutual aid to one another demonstrating the compassion that was at the heart of their existence. They began to establish authentic relationships between Jew and Gentile in the faith community.

The Anabaptists of the 16th century ignited a passion for being authentic followers of Jesus through the study and application of Scripture in new ways, offering mutual aid to others, and sharing their passion for the emerging way of understanding faithfulness.

The Anabaptist leaders forged a pathway of faithfulness that led to their expulsion from their communities and cathedrals. Not losing sight of their commitments, they forged new communities guided by their faith commitments and reshaped the landscape of religious experience that included believers baptism, discipleship living and excommunication, communion as a remembrance of Jesus, separation from evil, pastors of good reputation, pacifism, and not rendering an oath.

These core ideas present in the 1527 Schleithem Confession is a witness to their awakening, in which Anabaptists began to give shape to their experience with God and each other. Their experiences of lived faith created turmoil for the religious community and the culture in which they resided.

How do we assess the impact of turmoil and awakening associated with the pandemic in our life?

There is no need for social research to give witness to the turmoil we all experienced with social distancing, shuttered meetinghouses, adaptations to online activities, economic challenges with commerce and unemployment, hoping for a medical solution, and finally receiving vaccines.

I find it helpful to read social threads from Pew Research Center, which may help us see the awakening that is beginning to occur. The organization is described as “a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.”

Their most recent report, “Life in U.S. Religious Congregations Slowly Edges Back Toward Normal” provided me with some insights. Here are a few positive quotes from the article*:

- Three-quarters of U.S. adults who normally attend religious services now say they are “very” or “somewhat” confident they can do so safely, without spreading or catching the coronavirus.
- Roughly 4 in 10 people who typically attend religious services at least once or twice a month say they actually have done so, in person, during the past month.
- As in-person attendance has trended upward, there has been a corresponding decline in the share of regular religious attenders who recently have watched services online or on television.
- While growing numbers of religious attenders think their congregation should be open, the clear majority continues to say that various modifications and restrictions—such as social distancing, mask wearing, and limiting the number of people who can attend at any one time—are needed to continue the fight against the spread of the virus.

- Congregational life is returning to normal most rapidly among evangelical Protestants.
- It finds that roughly one-quarter of U.S. adults say their religious faith has grown stronger as a result of the pandemic, while 4% say their faith has been weakened; the remainder say that their faith has not changed much, including those who say they were not religious to begin with and still are not.

Just as turmoil was a common thread in the Early Church, as recorded in The Acts of the Apostles, and in the experiences of early Anabaptists, and just as it has been in living through this pandemic, the positive outcomes in each sociocultural context have been an awakening.

In all three historic settings, the normal routines of being and doing was challenged and the outcome was that things changed, but not without angst, pain, and suffering. More significantly, faith was awakened and strengthened through these experiences.

As a faith community which is beginning to have more freedom of movement and gathering than we experienced in the last 12 months, let us remain vigilant in our desire to strengthen our faith, engage in discerning how to be safe and keep others safe during this phase of the pandemic, but also to discover how our congregations can be a vital witness to the way of Jesus in this time of uncertainty, turmoil, and awakening.

* Found at [pewforum.org/2021/03/22/life-in-u-s-religious-congregations-slowly-edges-back-toward-normal/](https://www.pewforum.org/2021/03/22/life-in-u-s-religious-congregations-slowly-edges-back-toward-normal/)



Pathways
Virginia Mennonite Conference
601 Parkwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22802-2498



Virginia Mennonite Conference Delegate Assembly

Via Zoom on Saturday
June 12, 2021
8:00 am to noon

Registration
and more
information
to come.

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