

Delegates weigh in on proposed structural changes and release two congregations

By JON TROTTER

Congregational delegates of Virginia Mennonite Conference gathered for Winter Delegate Session at Waynesboro Mennonite Church, where they heard from the chair of the Polity Task Force, provided feedback in table groups and open microphone, and were introduced to the Restructure for Mission Committee, the group that is working on implementing the Polity Task Force's recommendations.

Delegates at the February 3 session also heard from Ervin Stutzman, who in his final year as Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA; caught up with the vision and new priorities of Executive Conference Minister Clyde G. Kratz; and released two North Carolina congregations, Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship and Raleigh Mennonite Church, from membership in Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Kevin Goertzen, lead pastor of Springdale Mennonite Church, began the day with a devotion on the need for a balance of wisdom and revelation from the Holy Spirit. After a time of singing and worship, led by the Springdale worship team, Howard Miller, lead pastor of Waynesboro Mennonite Church, welcomed attendees.

Ervin Stutzman, the retiring Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA, stated that the nature of what God wants us to do is create shalom.

"What does the gospel look like when it is genuine good news?" he asked. He shared how the spiritual streams evident in MC USA have shifted over the years, leaving some now feeling alienated while others feel more empowered.



Ervin Stutzman (center), retiring Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA, prays for the leaders of Virginia Mennonite Conference and Virginia Mennonite Missions: (from left) Elroy Miller, VMC Moderator; James Musser, Chair of Congregational Life Commission; Clyde G. Kratz, VMC Executive Conference Minister; Aaron Kauffman, VMMissions President; and Roy Hange, acting Chair of Faith and Life Commission. Photo: Jon Trotter

Through the "Journey Forward" process, which arose out of the Future Church Summit held last summer at Mennonite Church USA Convention in Orlando, congregations are asked to look at what God is calling their congregation to do next—what God's mission is for them—and provide feedback. Referencing Colossians 1:19-20, Ervin cautioned against making God's redemption too small. It includes all of creation. He encouraged delegates to "embrace the different spiritual streams because they all—together—allow us to see the fullness of God at work and the broadness of our collective mission."

Elwood Yoder, a historian and Ervin's neighbor, affirmed Ervin for his leadership, transparent sharing, and evangelical work.

Conference Council

Conference Moderator Elroy Miller highlighted work that Conference Council has completed since the July 2017 Delegate Session. He noted the "spirited conversations" on Council related to the Polity Task Force report, which they approved. He strongly affirmed the work of Gordon Zook, who served as Interim Conference Minister from October 1, 2017 through January 2,

Delegate Session continued on page 3

The hopes and challenges of 'restructuring for mission'

By ELROY MILLER, CONFERENCE MODERATOR



In fall 2016, Conference Council commissioned the Polity Task Force (PTF) to simplify the Virginia Mennonite Conference structure, strengthen the

accountability process, and strengthen unity in mission and spiritual practice.

At Winter Delegate Session in February, Polity Task Force chair Phil Kniss gave a report of the group's recommendations. (See the full report at <https://goo.gl/cSMizq>).

The report also recommended that "VMC clearly define itself as a *conference of congregations*, which meets together, through representatives, for various purposes including decision-making, and that the delegate assembly have the authority to make major decisions."

Approximately 500 persons within the Conference participated in the survey and focus groups that the task force used to create their recommendations. I want to thank everyone for their participation in this process, with particular thanks to the PTF for its work and thoughtful deliberation. It is deeply appreciated.

In response to the released report, Conference Council has authorized a Restructuring for Mission Committee with the purpose to present a final reorganization plan for future delegate affirmation

(see <https://goo.gl/FpUZY5> for the committee tasks). The committee members are: Pearl Hartman (Faith & Life Commission), Joe Longacre (Bylaws Committee), Elroy Miller, chair (Conference Council), Clyde Kratz (staff), Beryl Jantzi (Faith & Life Commission), Ryan Ahlgrim (Council & PTF) and Aaron Kauffman (VMMissions). The committee intends to present drafts of VMC structure changes to leadership and districts for review and feedback.

Conference Council has no illusions about how complicated it is to bring about organizational change. VMC is almost 200 years old and has weathered the challenges of time with respect for, and commitment to, God's work in the life of our congregations, districts and Conference. It has been diligent in partnering with the Holy Spirit in the work of God's church in this geographic area, and we are grateful.

By and large, the district minister leadership process has worked for the pastors, congregations and the conference. The Restructuring for Mission Committee will move forward with respect for what has come before, and will discern alongside districts and congregations what is needed to embrace a purposeful missional effort in the 21st century.

In the Winter Delegate Session, delegates also affirmed VMC's new mission statement: "*Virginia Mennonite Conference equips pastors, lay leaders, and congregants for worship and service, and to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far.*"

Pastoral transitions (January to March 2018)

Sandra "Sandy" Eberly Wenger, licensed as spiritual director/teacher at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, January 28, 2018.

J. Mark Frederick served as pastor at Immanuel while Matthew Bucher was on paternity leave (January 29 - March 25, 2018).

Anna Stutzman Janzen, ordination reactivated for interim role at Huntington, February 23, 2018.

Patricia Hawse Hendricks died February 28, 2018; she had served as Coordinator for Christian Formation, Immanuel Mennonite Church.

Glen Alexander Guyton, formerly of C3 Hampton, transferred to Western District Conference.

C. Norman Kraus, credentials withdrawn (non-disciplinary); he holds membership in a non-VMC congregation.

Kenneth "Ken" James Peterson, a member of Eastern District, retired from pastoral ministry in the Church of the Brethren.

Jason K. Kuniholm ended his role as interim pastor at Lindale Mennonite Church; **Owen E. Burkholder** is the new interim pastor.

In this issue:

3 "Joy in the Journey:" Reflections on VMC Minister's Retreat

Delegates weigh in on proposed structural changes and release two congregations (*cont'd from cover and continuing on page 4*)

5 Wisdom *and* revelation

6 A church reunion: a hopeful vision of VMC

Conference Related Ministries

7 EMU-VMC connections: why our partnership matters

Mennonite Women of Virginia: a vibrant organization connecting the women of VMC in fellowship and service

8 EMHS

FLRC: providing counseling for more than 30 years

Features

9 Walking with USA Ministries: Lyside Mennonite's story of hope through Kids Club

10 Footprints from the past: Maude Lantz's donation

11 Editorial: True faith...adapting to change

Conference Council is committed to keeping this mission statement front and center as we made adjustments to VMC leadership and ministries into the future.

Please participate in this conversation and keep this discernment effort in your prayers.

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“Joy in the Journey:” Reflections on VMC Ministers’ Retreat

By J. MICHAEL METZLER

I’m always suspicious when a retreat opportunity is presented to me. What kind of retreat, I wonder—a working “retreat” or a true opportunity to pull back from responsibilities at work and home for renewal and rest, a well-planned space to encounter God?

So when I learned about the Ministry Retreat offered by VMC on February 23-25, I moved towards the possibility slowly at first. Now looking back, I am grateful to God for the retreat hosted by Williamsburg Christian Retreat Center; and planned by Chris & MaryBeth Moore and Leslie & Bill Eberly.

A highlight for me was our gathered times of worship. Our song leaders, Carol and Skip Tobin, led us into God’s presence with familiar hymns, contemporary praise music, and original songs. We praised God. We lamented. We declared our identity as children of God. We even danced – laughing together as we struggled to perform simple grapevine steps. I found my soul refreshed by playful and prayerful times in God’s presence.

From beginning to end, the retreat offered ministers a true retreat. The planning team welcomed us with a gift bag that contained, among other things, cards of appreciation from congregation members. I read them twice during the retreat! The speaker, Bob Briscoe, focused on the theme “Joy in the Journey.” His relaxed, story-filled style



VMC ministers at retreat gather in a circle during a time of worship. Photo by J. Michael Metzler

of speaking allowed us to ponder the meaning and expression of joy in life and ministry. I appreciated the spaciousness of the retreat for exploration, reading, exercise, games, and freshly made popcorn over an open fire.

Certainly, one retreat a year is not enough to sustain pastors and church leaders for ministry. Yet I believe that the VMC Ministers’ Retreat is a wonderful opportunity for us to remember together God’s gift

of Sabbath, to build relationships with other leaders in our conference, and to enjoy God and God’s creation. Many thanks to the planning team and staff at WCRC for making this retreat possible!



Mike Metzler is Lead Pastor of Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va.



Clyde G. Kratz, Executive Conference Minister, reflects on his sabbatical and his next steps.

Photo by Jon Trotter

Delegate Session continued from cover

2018. The internship provided a sabbatical opportunity for Executive Conference Minister Clyde G. Kratz. Delegates provided loud applause in appreciation of Gordon’s work.

Conference Council counseled Kratz about which of his roles to emphasize or de-emphasize. Priority was given for engaging locations outside the Harrisonburg area, but with fewer direct visits to congregations than in recent years.

To provide more clarity about decision-making, Conference Council is communicating more about investigative processes (not details) regarding alleged ministerial

misconduct in an effective but careful way that doesn’t damage a leader’s reputation during the investigation period, nor protect one side at the expense of the other. FaithTrust Institute, the consulting firm that worked with VMC through the Luke Hartman/Duane Yoder investigation, has notified VMC that its current misconduct policy is protective of alleged offenders, but less supportive of those who have been offended.

Council also noted that VMC needs greater transparency as leaders move from one district, or one conference, to another; that VMC needs to provide more clarity when conflicts of interest occur; and to pay

Delegate Session continued on page 4

Winter Delegate Session cont'd from cover

more attention to ways others can speak into processes, such as through advocates who can provide a culture of care for congregations walking through a process.

Delegates approved Council's recommended mission statement by a show of hands. The new statement is "Virginia Mennonite Conference equips pastors, lay leaders, and congregants for worship and service, and to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far."



Kevin Goertzen, pastor of Springdale Mennonite Church, Waynesboro, Va., shares the devotion at Winter Delegate Session. Photo by Jon Trotter

Delegates release two congregations

Eastern Carolina District (ECD) Minister Spencer Bradford reported that ECD supports Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship's and Raleigh Mennonite Church's request to transfer their membership to Central District Conference, which is more open to the congregations' desire for greater inclusion of LGBTQ relationships. The request to transfer comes after a five-year discernment process; both congregations feel that VMC lacks support for their pastors and silences their congregations. The District remains in fellowship with Chapel Hill and Raleigh in spite of the disagreements within ECD on this issue. Delegates Aspen Yoder of Chapel Hill, and Rachel Taylor of Raleigh, provided their perceptions of the withdrawal process, and expressed pain, sorrow, and rejection from the Conference.

Upon the recommendation of Conference Council, the delegates of the 2018 Winter Delegate Session, with regret, released Chapel Hill and Raleigh from membership within VMC at the request of the

congregations, and the subsequent action of Eastern Carolina District, the release pending and contingent upon their acceptance into the membership of Central District Conference.

Reports from ECM and Commissions

Executive Conference Minister Clyde G. Kratz gave highlights of his activities from his recent October to December 2017 sabbatical, and shared with delegates about his ongoing work. Kratz encouraged credentialed leaders to discuss concerns with their district ministers, who are members of the Faith & Life Commission. Kratz also reminded leaders that the districts are responsible for both resourcing leaders and providing congregational oversight, and not to prioritize one task over another.

Roy Hange, vice-chair of the Faith & Life Commission (FLC), reported on highlights of their work since last summer's Conference Assembly. Members have participated in *Healthy Boundaries: Fundamentals*, and *Responding to Clergy Misconduct* trainings, both provided by FaithTrust Institute. FLC recommends that all active credentialed leaders complete the *Healthy Boundaries: Fundamentals* training, which is being made available in districts throughout the Conference. He also reported that FLC is considering a recertification proposal for credentialed leaders. The Commission is working to fill vacancies in the role of chair, and oversight leaders for the three clusters: administrative/leadership, chaplains, and teaching.

Congregational Life Commission (CLC) Chair James Musser informed delegates of two priorities his commission is currently engaged in: youth ministry, and men's ministry. CLC hosted a coffee hour in January, where interested persons brainstormed ideas to revitalize youth ministry. They agreed on the formation of a youth council. CLC is considering revitalizing Mennonite Men, but is discerning whether people's interest supports revitalizing it or working in a different direction.

VMMissions President Aaron Kauffman quoted Nehemiah 8:10, "The joy of the Lord is our strength." He acknowledged plenty to lament about, but also much to be joyful about. He noted several board membership changes. Lavonne Lehman will serve as VMMissions Board Chair when Shawn Manning reaches the end of his maximum number of terms this

fall. Terry Witmer has accepted the role of vice-chair. Financially, VMMissions ended the 2017 calendar year with a deficit, but by the end of January giving bounced back. VMMissions also received a large estate gift of \$500,000.

Kauffman also noted a number of staff changes. Ken Horst is retiring after 31 years serving VMMissions (13 years in Italy, and 18 on staff at the Harrisonburg office); Steve Leaman will move from a part-time role to full-time starting in May; Mindy Schwartz is now serving as event coordinator and MST coach; and Martin Rhodes is serving as discipleship ministry coach.

VMMissions has approved a new mission statement: "VMMissions partners in equipping and sending workers from anywhere to everywhere."

Polity Task Force Report and Restructure for Mission Committee

Phil Kniss, who served as chair of the Polity Task Force, provided a report to delegates and answered questions from delegates about the work and recommendation of the task force. Those recommendations were approved at the November 2017 Conference Council meeting, and have been forwarded to the newly-formed Restructure for Mission Committee for implementation. Table groups shared feedback to the delegate body, which VMC has compiled.

Kniss noted that the current Conference governance structure was adopted in March 1994, and served the Conference well, but the current generation's leadership practices may require changes in order to function more effectively.

The Restructure for Mission Committee, a new group tasked with taking the Polity Task Force recommendations and delegate feedback, and implementing new structures to align VMC's structure with its mission, was introduced to delegates. David Brubaker has agreed to serve as coach for the committee as they begin this process. Any questions about this process should be directed to the Restructure for Missions Committee through Elroy Miller, chair.



Jon Trotter is Communications Manager for Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Wisdom and revelation

A devotion shared at Winter Delegate Session

By KEVIN GOERTZEN

How do we know what God expects of us? How do we know where God is leading us...whether as individuals, congregations, or as a Conference? How does God communicate with us, His people?

In his book, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, Henry Blackaby answers these questions by stating that “God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.”

I like this description, in part because it keeps the Holy Spirit central. Even when listening to God through the Bible, interpretation is required. (If it wasn't, we would all believe exactly the same things.) And since interpretation is necessary, God speaks “by the Holy Spirit through the Bible.” And if we need the Holy Spirit to understand what God is saying through the Bible, we surely need the Holy Spirit to understand what God is saying through prayer, circumstances, and the church.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* affirms the key role of the Holy Spirit as well, stating that “by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church comes to unity in doctrine and action” (p. 17); and “the Spirit teaches us, reminds us of Jesus’ word, [and] guides us into all truth” (p. 18). But how the Holy Spirit guides and teaches us is not always agreed upon or clear cut.

So the question remains: How do we know where God is leading us...whether as individuals, congregations, or as a conference? Yes, God will speak to us “by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church.” But how do we know—how do we agree on—what God is saying?

In large part, in all these ways of knowing, it comes down to one of two options: by the revelation of the Holy Spirit; or by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Revelation is a miraculous disclosure; an epiphany; an unveiling of some truth. It is not something that is figured out or intentionally discovered—but simply “made known.” Biblically, we know that people come to know God through revelation.

Although there are lots of texts that show this, the most direct example is Galatians 1:12, where Paul writes “for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” So knowing by means of revelation is clearly one pattern in Scripture.

The other way of knowing about God and God’s direction is via wisdom. Wisdom is common sense; sound judgement; rea-

In order for us to learn from both wisdom and revelation, we are going to have to trust one another. We are going to have to trust the presence of God speaking in and through the other members of our conference; the other people sitting at our table.

soning it out. In some ways, wisdom could be seen as the exact opposite of revelation. It is not something that is “just known,” but something that is intentionally sought out and discerned. But that doesn’t mean it is any less spiritual. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 12, wisdom is listed as one of the spiritual gifts.

And as is true with revelation, we know that wisdom is also a biblical pattern through which people come to know God. For example, in Isaiah 1:18, God says to His people: “Come, let us reason together” (NIV). Or as the King James Version puts it: “Come now, let us argue it out.” And as the church leaders met together in Acts 15, they worked at discovering God’s leading through debate, listening, quoting Scripture, and sharing stories... in other words, through a wise and careful process. So knowing by means of wisdom is also one pattern in Scripture.

So which is better? How can we best hear God’s voice? How can we best discern God’s leading... through revelation or wisdom?

My sense is that most of us have an answer in our heads. Some of us tend to trust wisdom and be a bit suspicious of revelation. After all, how can you confirm

revelation? How do we differentiate between a prophet and a nut case?

Others of us trust revelation and are suspicious of wisdom. After all, doesn’t 1 Corinthians say that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (1:25); and “our faith should not rest on human wisdom” (2:5)?

But Scripture gives examples of both. In Ephesians 1, Paul is definitive that both are needed: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you” (vss. 17-18a).

It is only through the combination of wisdom AND revelation that the eyes of our hearts are enlightened. And when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened, then we know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance, and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

But in order for us to learn from both wisdom and revelation, we are going to have to trust one another. We are going to have to trust the presence of God speaking in and through the other members of our conference; the other people sitting at our table. We are going to have to trust both the wisdom of those who are careful, critical thinkers... and the revelation of those who sometimes just have a sense of how God is leading us.

Both wisdom and revelation are needed in the church today. So let us put away our suspicions and trust one another more. Let us trust the Holy Spirit to be at work speaking through the wisdom of our group discernment and the revelation that comes in ways we do not understand, “so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us.”



Kevin Goertzen is Lead Pastor of Springdale Mennonite Church, Waynesboro, Va.

A church reunion: a hopeful vision for VMC

By ANDREW R.W. BUCKWALTER
FAIRFIELD

“The more we get together, the happier we’ll be.” Isn’t that how it’s supposed to go? As a recently-credentialed minister with Virginia Conference, our conference sessions are new and exciting enough to me that I still find myself having fun, but unfortunately I get the feeling that isn’t true for everyone. Indeed, it seems that often people feel that the Conference is a burden, a chore, or even a shackle.

So while I’m very honored to be asked to write about how I envision Virginia Mennonite Conference, I’m also aware of my own relative lack of experience. I offer these words in humility, hoping that my newcomer’s perspective may become an asset if it is heard in the enthusiastic and loving spirit in which it is intended.

From where I’m standing, it looks like there are two competing ideas about what the Conference should be:

The first, the more historical view, draws its model from the great Christian tradition of church councils—from the Council of Nicea to the writing of the *Schleitheim Confession* to the adoption of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. In this view, the Conference should be concerned with identity above all else, calling our churches to remember who we are and whose we are. The task of the conference is, in large part, to make decisions about right belief and practice, decisions about what is permissible and what is rejected, to interpret the scriptures and the movement of the Spirit and to apply it to our community life.

The challenge to this traditional view invites us to draw from the modern idea of an academic convention. In this view, the conference doesn’t really make decisions at all. It’s more of an open gathering, a place to swap ideas, pool resources, and network. The attendees are qualified specialists, or interested and informed amateurs, and they might even receive some sort of academic credit for attending. Such a gathering might make some administrative decisions, but mostly bear down on where and when the next conference assemblies should take place and who is responsible for coffee.

Members might publish a joint statement on some topic or another, a unified expression of opinion, but attendees who hold extremely unconventional views (imagine a geologist who believes the moon is made of cheese) are still accepted and tolerated, so long as they are respectful and don’t waste everyone’s time.

These are the two visions I see of VMC, the historical view and its challenger. So which will it be, decisions or discussions? Identity or information? Will we attend as representatives or as thought leaders? Are we the conscientious gatekeepers of an ancient tradition or the ambitious architects of a new society?

I don’t think either one does justice to our high calling found in Scripture. Yes, both of them describe important parts of what Virginia Mennonite Conference needs to do but neither of them are a good model for what we are. The Bible is full of metaphors that help us understand what the church should be, and those metaphors do include local government assemblies and scholarly symposia. But by far, the most important, most central, and most helpful image is that of the church as family.

And in the Bible, this understanding of the church extends not just to the local churches, but to the assemblies and councils that are called to address hot-button issues as well. Even when the Council of Jerusalem met as a decision-making body, as it had to do in the face of the question about what Jewish laws the Gentile Christians should obey, they did so from the standpoint of family, as “brothers.” And they laid down the law with gentleness, not with harsh threats. (“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...you will do well to avoid these things.” Acts 15:23-29.)

What would I have to do to get kicked out of my family? What must an individual do to be kicked out of a church? Well, in some families getting a mohawk and a tattoo is enough, and in some of the early churches eating meat sacrificed to an idol was enough. But for a healthy family, and I think for a healthy church too, nothing short of cruelty, disrespect, or a threat to myself or others would be enough to get me expelled—and even then, even if I were asked to not attend, I believe the love of the

church family would go with me wherever I went.

One side might ask, what’s the point of belonging to a conference that doesn’t stand for anything? The other side might ask, why belong to a group that doesn’t do anything?

To see the conference as family turns these questions around: Why go to a family reunion that doesn’t stand for anything? Why belong to a family that doesn’t do anything more than just get together? When we ask it like that, we see that while action and principles are both crucially important, they are not the core nor the purpose of the church. Like a healthy family, the core of a healthy church is unconditional love, and the purpose of God’s Church is simply to exist, to live out that love, to be the body of Christ in this world. The principles and the action are born out of that love, not the other way around, and from that baseline we can become both representative decision-makers and innovative thought leaders as the situation requires.

For me, a Virginia Mennonite Conference get-together is a spiritual family reunion. I love seeing the familiar faces, and I love meeting new people even more, people to whom I know I am bound for the long haul, people who I trust will want to be with me and support me as unconditionally, just as I want to be with them and support them. Like meeting an out-of-state cousin for the first time, meeting a person at a VMC assembly always feels like an important opportunity, a start to a new story.

We need to make decisions sometimes, and we need to share resources constantly, but those things are not what we are. We are siblings, fellow children of God, led by none other than Christ whose love unites us. So I say we need more socializing. More catching up. More arranging playdates. More singing. More being there just because we want to be with the people who are there. More hard heart-to-hearts. More reconciliation. “The more we get together, the happier we’ll be.”



Andrew R.W. Buckwalter Fairfield is pastor of Christiansburg Mennonite Fellowship, Christiansburg, Va.

EMU-VMC connections: why our partnership matters

By SUSAN SCHULTZ HUXMAN

This year, EMU is 100! Our Centennial celebrations gave us rich opportunities to examine what sustains us as we look eagerly toward seizing our second bold century. Over the past 100 years, our connections to the church have been strong, even as the form of those connections has changed. In our 100-year history, our official connections have changed, from unaffiliated with church, to affiliated with the conference, to connected to various educational boards of the denomination. But one thing has not changed: EMU needs the church, and the church needs EMU.

In our 100th year, Virginia Conference is important to us. We can do more together than we can on our own. For example, many



Eastern
Mennonite
University

of our faculty and staff are active members in Virginia Conference churches. As board chairs, Sunday School teachers, worship leaders and other roles too numerous to name, EMU faculty and staff are resources for churches and agencies of Virginia Conference. And in turn, these conference connections give faculty and staff an opportunity to embody their faith commitments in a different way. Additionally our students bring life and energy to churches around Harrisonburg. Passion for social justice,

creation care, and authentic outreach is nurtured both at EMU and in your congregations. Our partnership creates a vibrant faith community.

And our broader connection to MCUSA is important to us. Mennonite education is distinctive because it is counter-culture—enacting the “upside-down kingdom” and the reconciling love of Jesus inside and outside the classroom, forging connections between faith and learning, and forming life-giving and life-altering community.



Susan Schultz Huxman is President of Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va.

Mennonite Women of Virginia: a vibrant organization connecting the women of VMC in fellowship and service

By GLORIA L. LEHMAN

Mennonite Women of Virginia (MWV) is a vibrant organization that empowers women to creatively build Christ-centered relationships through fellowship, leadership, mission and service. A brief look at our history shows us that the women of Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) were active in structured and unstructured ways for practically 100 years, from the early years of the Conference's existence.

In prior years, the women's organization was called Women's Missionary and Service Commission (WMSC) and thrived through the years with women's groups doing acts of service, including preparing clothing items and food for needy persons in their own community and around the world.

MWV's membership is every woman who is part of a congregation with ties to the Conference organization—about half of the Conference! Some congregations have a structured women's group which meets regularly, with certain projects and goals. Other congregations are more casual about organizing, caring for persons as needs arise, and holding meetings or retreats as desired.

One of MWV's legacies is the opening of the Gift & Thrift store in Harrisonburg in 1982. The president of the Virginia WMSC at the time, Gladys Ropp, served on the planning committee along with many others. The VMC congregations – Community, Harrisonburg, Lindale, Mt. Clinton, Park View, Trissels, Valley View, Zion, and Zion Hill – were sponsoring churches. Many women volunteered, and still do, at this store that reaches many in the community. This tied the store into the work of VMC.

MWV plans three annual events and uses the network of communication through VMC to get out the word, inviting women to participate. The Annual Missions Day event (May 2), the Prayer Breakfast during VMC Assembly (July 21), and the Women's Retreat (Oct. 26-28) are planned for 2018. Women from across the conference get information by way of the VMC website, the



Guest speaker Elaine Maust shares at the 2017 Annual Mennonite Women of Virginia Retreat at Natural Bridge Historic Inn, Natural Bridge, Va. Photo courtesy of Gloria Lehman

announcements sent out each week, the Facebook page, and by direct emails.

Here in VMC, Mennonite Women of Virginia are tied to the conference by linking the congregations together as we strive to empower women in building Christ-centered relationships. All women, join us!



Gloria L. Lehman is President of Mennonite Women of Virginia. She resides near Harrisonburg, Va.



EMS students deepen their faith and connections during the Service, Silence, & Solitude experiential learning experience at Headwaters Lodge. Courtesy photo

A light in the dark

By PAUL LEAMAN

Single file, like ants to the sugar bowl, students descended deeper and deeper into the dark abyss. The cave's passage-way grew increasingly cool, moist, and tight. Only narrow rays of light could be seen reflecting from the entrance port. One last bend and darkness pinches in. We heard anxious shouts: "Slow down!" "Don't push!" "I can't even see my own hand!" The leader's instruction echoed, "Once you're on the ground level, hold another person's hand." Complete darkness; visibility zero.

Phoosh. The leader lit a match. Everyone's muddy faces glowed in warm light. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. You are the light of the world," he said.

Mr. Stutzman's Service, Silence, and Solitude activity during E-Term once again left a lasting impression on students. Each one was encouraged to live like the flame of that match, a person who extinguishes darkness. The EMS vision statement says:

Eastern Mennonite School aspires to reflect Christ's light as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and lives God's call.

How do agency partners like Eastern Mennonite School enhance the ministry of the Church? Agencies are grassroots organic opportunities for our community-at-large to witness Anabaptism in action. Every day at EMS we have 116 students and approximately 75 family units from other-

than-Mennonite backgrounds leaning into Christian values from an Anabaptist perspective. And, these families enrich our experience just as new attendees refresh and invigorate our congregations and conference. Many families have selected Mennonite congregations after learning to appreciate the values of our school community. In short, agencies like EMS are missions of the church...that are largely self-funded.

At EMS, we are strategically considering whether it is time for a new narrative. As illustrated in the opening vignette, people look for light. How can we become a brighter light in our community for the glory of God? Successful and vibrant school communities become magnets whereby the school and its associations thrive. We aspire to be that for Virginia Mennonite Conference and our local congregations.

It takes partnership, buy-in, a shared message that we are an essential part of the church and that our children gain much from attending. We want people who are confident, generous, and even proud to be part of a mission-focused agency committed to growing many rays of bright light in the lives of young people. Let's fan into flame and be a bright and glorious light in the world. There is no higher calling!



Paul Leaman is Head of Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Va.

FLRC: providing counseling for more than 30 years

By MARIE BRADLEY

Family Life Resource Center is an independent, Christian-based, nonprofit counseling service offering individual, marital, and family counseling. We are committed to supporting families and individuals in their time of need.

With over 30 years of serving the community, it is such a blessing knowing that we have helped individuals and couples in this mission field.

We continue to be grateful for the Virginia Mennonite Conference and its member congregations for their support and encouragement. We are thankful for the many counselors, directors, office support, and donors that work hard to make FLRC successful. And we could not have succeeded thus far without the dedication and service of our Board of Directors.



Community support is important to FLRC since we are a nonprofit that receives no government funding. In 2017, our operating costs were \$454,000. Counseling income provides 93% of the total funding; contributions and fundraising covered the remaining 7%. The agency gave away \$15,000 in services to individuals that could not otherwise afford counseling.

Family Life Resource Center continues to strive toward our commitment of offering hope, health, and healing.



Marie Bradley is Administrative Director of Family Life Resource Center, Harrisonburg, Va.

Lynside Mennonite's story of hope through Kids Club

By SUE MILLER, as told to CAROL TOBIN

“You provide the program. I will bring the kids.” This is what Sue Miller sensed God saying to her when a member of Lynside Mennonite Church came to her with a burden for the children in their church and community. They had only a couple of kids coming to Sunday School. A church van sat unused in the parking lot.

Five years later, they have two vans, a core group of some twenty volunteer drivers, riders and teachers involved in connecting with 30 to 60 kids through a Wednesday night Kids Club and expanded Sunday School program.

The congregation recently celebrated the baptisms of Laurel and Steve. Laurel is a mother of one of the first neighborhood children to start connecting with the Lynside children's programs. Steve is a big-hearted man who joined his believing wife in leading the newly formed youth group. His willingness to serve led him into a deeper relationship with Christ. Sue reflects on the unfolding story:

I remember what it was like for me early on in this adventure. One of the Bible School volunteers hinted that I should be visiting a particular home and inviting the mother to church. The fear I had of visiting her home was almost overwhelming. But what was I afraid of?

I got over my fear! Sometime later, I knocked at Laurel's door. And what did I find but a young woman, pregnant and needy, ready to be embraced by a caring congregation. When Laurel's son Eddie was born with a cleft palate and bilateral lip, church members took on the family with a deep love and helped meet some of the physical needs. Now, visiting is a huge part of my life and the life of our church.



Laurel with her son Eddie.
Courtesy of Sue Miller

As a congregation, we are stretched as we come face to face with the brokenness of our community. The issues of our own easy-to-hide addictions are suddenly more real as we are confronted by the more obvious addictions of some of our new friends. Who would have ever imagined us learning how to welcome someone who comes stumbling drunk into worship on Sunday morning? But that is what is happening.

We are stretched by God as we forge relationships with our Hispanic neighbors. I will share one story. For over a year, my daughter and I met for lunch at a little Mexican restaurant.

During that same period, I made several phone calls to a Mexican woman I knew as Mary Lou, confirming that we would be picking up her kids for our various activities. Imagine my surprise when one of the volunteers informed me that Michael's mother worked at that little restaurant where

my daughter and I ate lunch. Imagine the joy when I asked the waitress—who had been serving us week in and week out—if she was Mary Lou, and she responded “Yes!” *And I am Sue!*

God has brought me together with this Catholic sister. I am tutoring Michael in their home, and Mary Lou has been teaching me Spanish worship songs to teach the children.

We shared a holy moment recently when

we sang together a beautiful hymn, she in Spanish, I in English.

God has been directing us all the way. Our people are faithful and so generous. All we needed was a focus that put us in touch with the work God has equipped and prepared us for, using us to bless our community. It is exactly as Paul describes in Ephesians 2, “We are created in Christ Jesus for good works...”

No, we are not focused on seeing our pews full on Sunday morning. Instead, we are excitedly asking God, “What's next?”



Sue Miller with Mary Lou's children, Michael and Kimberly.
Courtesy of Sue Miller



Sue Miller is a member of Lynside Mennonite Church, Lynchburg, Va.

Maude Lantz's donation

By ELWOOD YODER

In 1992, Maude Lantz donated her small copy of *Constitution, Bylaws, and Rules* to the EMU Historical Library. At 74 years of age, Maude didn't need the little booklet any more because the Virginia Mennonite Conference had changed dramatically during her lifetime.

Maude Lantz (1918-2006) lived through several major organizational changes in Virginia Mennonite Conference. The little *Rules* booklet she kept in such good shape evolved through seven versions.

But for the first 12 years of her life, there was no Constitution for the Conference at all. When she became a teenager in 1930, the Conference adopted a constitution and set of rules that bishops enforced. Life insurance and radios were banned. Men were told not to grow a mustache. There was a warning against "gross sins." In 1974, when Maude was 56 years old, her conference leaders wisely dropped the strict little rule book.

Maude and her husband John Lantz lived for many years on a cattle and crop farm in Broadway, Va., where they raised eight



Maude Geil in 1937.
Photo courtesy of Emily Lantz

children and invested themselves heavily in Zion Mennonite Church. During the restless 1960s, John and Maude turned a chicken shed on their farm into

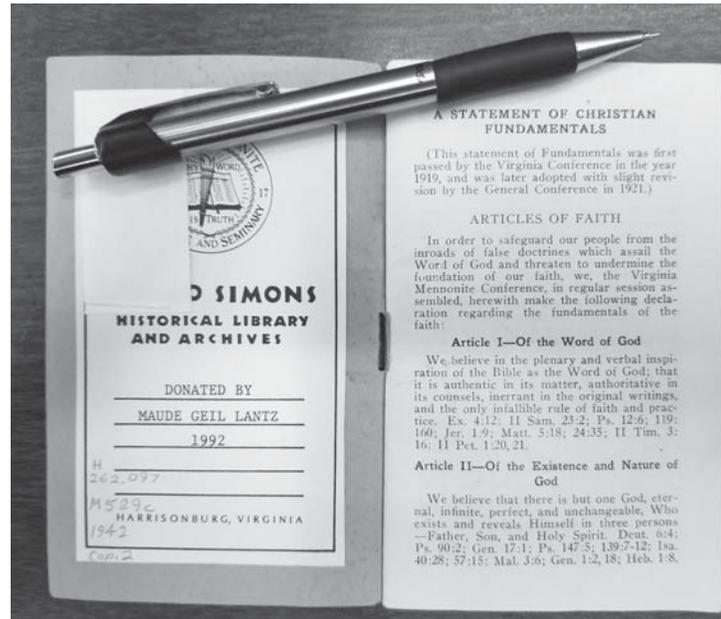
a center for youth to gather and hang out, outfitted with sofas, easy chairs, and tables.

In the early 1940s, the Conference printed many copies of the *Rules* booklet for wide distribution, and that was probably when Maude received hers. Maude understood that

she had "decrees for to keep," as stated in her copy, and she was an outstanding and supportive lay member of Virginia Mennonite Conference all her life.

When she donated her 64-page *Rules* booklet to the Historical Library, the Conference was preparing to change its constitution again. A 1994 major revision to the *Constitution and Bylaws* empowered lay delegates who had only recently been included in church business. When Maude as a young woman received her little booklet, only ordained ministers were members of Conference. When she passed in 2006, lay members were engaged at every level of Conference activity and her home church had a female youth minister.

John and Maude supported Virginia Conference, helped their pastors for



Constitution, Bylaws and Rules booklet. EMU Historical Library; photo by Elwood Yoder

decades, and served where needed. Maude's little *Constitution, Bylaws, and Rules* booklet simply ceased being meaningful as times changed, as new leaders emerged, and as the strong bishop system she had grown up in went away.



Maude and John Lantz, 1946.
Photo courtesy of Emily Lantz

Maude's great grandchildren in the Northern District today will hardly notice the latest major *Constitution and Bylaws* revision underway. Nor do they need to. While the Conference organizational system does appear to need revision, it seems doubtful that Conference leaders will make booklets for wide distribution. Maude Lantz's little *Rules* booklet stands as a testa-

ment to mid-twentieth century Mennonite belief and thought. The structural changes underway in the Conference today follow a long line of constitutional revisions, and they will help carry Conference members into the future.



Elwood Yoder teaches Bible and Social Studies at Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Va.



The John and Maude Lantz family in 1963.
Photo courtesy of Emily Lantz

True faith...adapting to change

By CLYDE G. KRATZ



Turbulence is occurring in the broader culture, Mennonite Church USA, and Virginia Mennonite Conference.

People of Christian faith wrestle with change in various ways. For some people, the present reality leads to anxiety; a sense that too much change is happening too quickly. This causes a desire to hold on to the past and to stay with familiar patterns, practices, and beliefs. This can result in legalism and rigidity.

For other people, changes are deemed long overdue. Sensing that the time is right to push for changes, some may rush headlong into it without enough discernment because it is different from, and preferable to, the way things were done in the past. This can result in unintended consequences, a lack of accountability, and a “throw the baby out with the bathwater” mentality.

In Jesus’ day, there were various groups of people that demonstrated a particular response to change. Very familiar to us are the Pharisees, a group committed to upholding the religious tradition. They were often written about by gospel writers as the antagonists to Jesus’ ministry.

The Essenians, a Jewish sect living in a strict communal context, are often characterized as living separate from the world, or perhaps withdrawn from the general society.

Another group, the Sadducees, had religious authority, but were often seen as brokering relationships—or collaborating—with the Roman authorities for the benefit of the religious community.

Finally, the Zealots were a political movement founded to incite people to change, often utilizing violence to tear the cultural status quo apart for their ends.

None of these four movements were embraced by Jesus. As the representative of true faith in accordance to the way of God, he preached and lived a new way.

In Mennonite Church USA, the leadership of the denomination is changing. The new Executive Director, Glen Guyton, is

the first African-American to lead our denomination which historically has been European-centric in its make up. Many new key denominational staff also come from other-than-European ethnic backgrounds, or are female.

The key leaders of Mennonite Church USA reflect a diversity never seen before. This significant change leads us to think about our commitment to the vision of Mennonite Church USA in a positive way. In times past, we may have identified with a familiar well-known personality that innately gave us a sense of trust in the leadership. Perhaps the new Executive Director and denominational staff are less familiar to us, but it is our commitment to trust the vision of Mennonite Church USA for true representation in the denomination. We trust that these persons will lead with integrity, clarity, and transparency.

We are now embarking on revitalizing the organization, rethinking how Virginia Mennonite Conference structures itself to live out our mission and vision. This will require adaptation, but also trust in the providential care of God to guide us.

In Virginia Mennonite Conference, we are embarking on a period of change as well. When I began my assignment nearly five years ago, I identified three priorities:

a) Making Disciples, b) Discerning Contemporary Issues, c) Revitalizing the Organization.

We are now embarking on revitalizing the organization, rethinking how Virginia Mennonite Conference structures itself to live out our mission and vision. The Restructure for Mission Committee is already taking the recommendations from the Polity Task Force and seeking to implement organizational change over the next year.

This will require adaptation, but also trust in the providential care of God to guide us in reframing our Conference for the next decade in order to support congregational-based ministries of making disciples.

I will acknowledge that I have encountered members of our Conference who demonstrate the characteristics of three religious groups that Jesus tangled with during his ministry.

There are persons wanting to hold on to the current structure. There are people who function like zealots, and who welcome anarchy over organizational integrity. There are people who want to flee to other conferences in order to ignore historic identity and communal discernment.

However, it is my sincere belief that, as we navigate together, sharing our vision and mission with each other, there can be a revitalized community of faith that has functional integrity for the health of our faith community.

Recently, I was at a meeting where a prominent Mennonite scholar acknowledged that the future of Christianity lies in the Southern Hemisphere. In addition, he wondered whether the Reformation and even Anabaptism would have any relevancy at the end of this next period of time.

When Christian faith is no longer empowered and inspired by Westernized and European-centric views of the church, the church will take on a different character than what we have traditionally seen.

It is my belief that the changes we are seeing in Mennonite Church USA and Virginia Mennonite Conference move us closer to the future church than what we currently have. These changes take an authentic faith and commitment to the way of Jesus. The challenge is ours to embrace it now, in our time, despite a long history of power and decision-making almost exclusively in the hands of white male leaders.

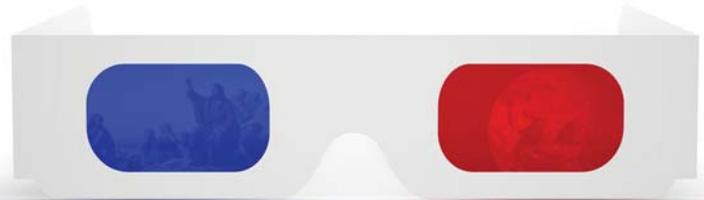
Subsequent generations will judge us positively or negatively on whether we achieved success in this endeavor to open the structures of the church to new leaders and new ideas. I hope that we will pray together and work diligently together to guide our beloved church into the future.

May our future historians be kind to us as we navigate our future with hope and trust in the providence of God.

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



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