

Faith Mennonite Church
July 17, 2011
Pittsburgh Assembly Reporting

Bridges to (the) Cross
1 Corinthians 3:1-17

This was my first bi-annual Mennonite Church-USA convention and my first time being a delegate. Thank you for this opportunity to be a part of this Convention within OUR sometimes complicated and intense church family. I wanted to be a delegate from Faith Mennonite Church to represent my congregation as an active caring listener with Mennonite who sometimes hold different Christian views. As a long time Scripture loving and reading, prayerful, playful, and active peacebuilding follower of Jesus, I had multiple opportunities to share with others how, in some cases, I respectfully had a different view.

As a delegate, I was assigned to a table with a diverse group of delegates of males, females, African Americans, Indonesians and Japanese Americans as well as Caucasians. Together we reflected on Scripture, discussed issues of importance to the church, shared ideas about how we “do church back home,” and encouraged each other to step up the open microphone to share with the wider Church body.

Early on we voted in favor of what was referred to as “the Pittsburgh Experiment.” The Pittsburgh Experiment was an effort to provide maximum time for delegate discussion rather than spending the bulk of time proposing and voting on specific resolutions, such as the Mennonite Church is against the continuing war in Afghanistan. This approach allowed us to get to discern different ideas in a meaningful way without the pressure of having to vote on resolution statements within a specific time period.

One of my favorite parts of the week was a new process at Convention called the Conversation Room. Topics included Human Sexuality, Abortion, Immigration and the Phoenix Challenges and Possibilities, Divestment in Israel/Palestine, the Role of Teaching Positions, Dialogue, and Discernment, and Sexual Orientation. The Conversation Room was open nine sessions lasting 90 minutes and not surprisingly one session lasted three hours. The trained facilitators had no idea how many people to expect but very quickly they learned that the process was very popular, as the Conversation Room was sometimes bursting at the seams. The facilitators led the groups through structured conversation similar to the talking circle we have used here at Faith Mennonite Church. Each session began by all participants agreeing together on conversation ground rules rooted in who we want to be as followers of Christ. The goal of each sessions was not to convince each other to take a different position or to come up with a final answer, but rather to practice listening and speaking with loving intention. Sessions were deemed successful when in the end participants felt they listened well to someone who held a different perspective or when someone listened well to them.

I participated in conversations on Human Sexuality, the Discernment Process, and Sexual Orientation. I believe this was and is a vital part of seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit and engaging in Christian discernment. With other Convention goers, I practiced listening to one another and speaking in love the truth as I understand it. We came open to the possibility that the Divine might have something to say to us through our sisters and brothers in Christ.

I found the Conversation Rooms to be a hopeful sign for the larger Mennonite Church and great first step toward attempting to provide a safe space for differing views to have

respectful, confidential air time. They were not perfect by any means, but as someone wise once told me, “if something is worth doing, it worth doing poorly at first.” With regular practice, if the Mennonite Church continues to be in these types of respectful equality-seeking conversations, we will get better at it. One of the facilitators began the first gathering by defining Conversation as “against difference.” As we chose to enter into these types of Conversations, I believe we are saying, “together we will listen and speak with the hope of finding the path toward being against the difference between us together.”

I hope that the Conversation Room on these differences and future disagreements among us becomes a long, trusted tradition at the convention. I also hope that we will feel free to practice these strategies of deep compassionate listening and mindful speaking so that in the years to come, the Mennonite Church will be a light to others about how we witness Divine reconciliation among US. – *Donna Minter, delegate*

Pink Menno started 2 1/2 years ago before the Mennonite Church USA Conference in Columbus with a small group of friends who wanted to raise the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (lgbtq) Mennonites and encourage the church to accept and welcome those lgbtq Mennonites fully. We organized, raised funds, connected with many other concerned people, young and old and started collaborating with Brethren Mennonite Council and the Open Letter Pastors group. We showed up to Columbus 2 years ago in bright pink and brought the discussion of welcome back to peoples minds. We talked to many youth at the conference who want the church to be a safe place for them and their lgbtq friends. We held seminars, worship services, hymn sings, a free pink garage sale and had a hospitality room where young and old could drop in for info, pink stuff, and a safe place.

We kept some of that energy and momentum going through the last two years but our focus so far has been national church conferences. It is where the church gathers and we do too. We are not sanctioned by MCUSA, they don't give us booth space in the exhibit hall, seminar time on the schedule or official space to do our work. Once again at this year's convention in Pittsburgh, we came out in pink and spread the word. Collaborating again with BMC and the Open Letter Pastors, we had a hospitality room in a nearby hotel and held seminars and a worship service led by Randall Spaulding, a Mennonite pastor who was recently disciplined by his conference and removed from the MCUSA worship council when he came out as gay and married his partner. We worked to keep posting information on our website, facebook, and twitter to let conference goers and those who couldn't attend know what was happening. We participated in the MCUSA conference and added to it by holding a daily welcoming worship service in the convention hallway and daily hymn sings before each of the youth and adult worship services held in the convention center.

I often found myself staffing the hospitality room and missed some of our own events but I did get to go to some of our daily worship times and one of our best attended hymn sings before adult worship on Wednesday. People kept gathering and joining in, even some who may have not been down with the Pink message but just wanted to sing hymns, mostly missing from the convention worship, with a vibrant group of singers in a beautiful space.

MCUSA committed at the conference two years ago in Columbus to open the conversation about lgbtq welcome and this year they did that by having a conversation room in the convention center. There were different topics discussed including abortion, immigration, human sexuality, and sexual orientation. I was able to attend one of these sessions: about sexual orientation. The room was unsurprisingly packed and they used a series of concentric circles to

create a fishbowl sort of discussion instead of small groups as they had done in other conversations. The moderator worked to create an open space where a diversity of thought was expressed and speakers were asked to summarize previous speakers before saying their piece. In some ways it was a positive step of opening the conversation and more voices were heard than often are at these things. In other ways, it was not a very safe space for lgbtq participants. As time went on some of the process was lost due to limited time and a desire for participation. This led to less moderation and it turned into a bit of an open mic, where preaching against lgbtq people went unmoderated.

Despite some frustrations like that, the week felt positive. We saw a lot of support, had some wonderful discussions with those we agree with and those we don't. Hopefully, our work has given hope to more youth who don't want to have to choose between being lgbtq and allied and being Mennonite.

There is a wealth of video, photos, and articles on www.pinkmenno.org and in the Pink Menno Facebook group. I encourage you to dig in and see what the week was like in Pink.

- *Katie Hochstedler, Pink Menno*

The title of the Pittsburgh Convention: “Bridges to (the) Cross” was inspired by the more than 400 bridges that traverse two rivers that run through the city of Pittsburgh (more than in any other city in the US). At times it seems that there are at least as many bridges—or diversities that need to be bridged—in Mennonite Church USA. Coming together as brothers and sisters from all over the US can be exhilarating and it can be painful. Although we share a common Confession of Faith, there are strong theological, cultural, political, and ideological divides in our church.

In advance of the assembly, the Executive Board prepared and circulated a document, “Desiring God’s Coming Kingdom: a Missional Vision & Purposeful Plan for Mennonite Church USA. It is now ten years since this new denomination formed, bringing together two formerly separate denominations of Mennonites. They joined around the vision that “God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.”

The “Purposeful Plan” takes stock of where the church is and offers itself as a bridge, the foundational structure, to how and where we will move into the future. The major portion of our discussion time during delegate sessions focused on this document, and because the delegate body generally affirmed the priorities set out here, I anticipate that our congregation will use this as a guide for setting our own direction in the coming months and years.

We do not have time this a.m. to give a meaningful overview of the plan, so I have tried to give it a bit of visual representation: It begins by reminding us that *Jesus is the center of our faith*. That *community is the center of our lives*. And that *reconciliation is the center of our work*. If these statements are true and if we want them to remain true, the document names seven priorities that we must give attention to: Christian Formation, Christian Community, Intercultural Transformation, Stewardship, Leadership Development, Christian Community, Holistic Christian Witness.

Although the official work of convention takes place at the delegate tables, much of the richness of attending convention, and frankly, some of the more honest conversation, takes place during the breaks and over meals, and this year, in the conversation rooms that Donna and Katie spoke of, and in the on- and off-site activities organized by PinkMenno, the grassroots movement to work for inclusion of glbt persons in the Mennonite Church.

It was in many of these conversations that I received affirmation for the experience and witness of our congregation as we welcome lgbt persons, even as the denomination continues to struggle over questions of sexuality and inclusion. I was blessed by the welcoming worship service planned by Pink Menno, (held off-side) and by a gathering of some 50 pastors who are lgbt welcoming in their ministry.

It is always gratifying to meet persons who were formerly part of this congregation: I was pleased to talk with Silas Crews (who accompanied our youth to the San Jose Convention in 2007), with Bob & Lauren Brown (who left us just a year ago to pastor a small-town, traditional Mennonite Church in Johnstown, PA), with Tim Lehman (a former pastor), and to Sara Dyck (a former member)—all of whom sent greetings.

There are some who look at our church and wonder if the bridges will hold. We know all too well here in MN that stable bridges rely on careful, regular structural inspection and timely repair. One of the weaknesses of the Purposeful Plan is that it frames questions of sexuality and lgbt inclusion as cracks in the trusses, noting that discussion in other denominations has caused division and strife, something that makes us peace-loving Mennonites extremely uncomfortable. But then it looks away, and asks the church to focus on non-divisive issues.

I heard voices saying that we want to do the hard work; that it is through struggle that we grow. I heard voices calling for the Conversation Room topics to be brought to the delegate tables in future conventions. I believe that if we choose the bridge to the Cross of Christ we can be confident that brokenness and suffering will ultimately be reconciled.

In his opening address to youth and adults, Shane Hipps, a former Mennonite pastor who now serves with Rob Bell, author of *Love Wins*, in Grand Rapids, MI, said that throughout church history, divisive issues have generally been posed in terms of purity or justice. Shane called on Mennonites to be about the work of reconciliation. I do believe this is our call.

- *Joetta Schlabach, pastor & delegate*