

2019 MENNONITE CHURCH USA CONVENTION – KANSAS CITY

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July 3, 2019

Delegate assembly Bible study leader: ‘The church is a mess. Thanks be to God!’



**7.3. 2019** Written By: Paul Schrag for Mennonite World Review **1,117** read

*Photo: Delegates during table discussion. Photo by Vada Snider.*

On the first day of the Mennonite Church USA delegate assembly July 3, delegates started a Bible study on themes of unity in Ephesians and heard a state-of-the-church message from executive director Glen Guyton.



Tom Yoder Neufeld. Photo by Vada Snider.

Moderator David Boshart told the nearly 500 delegates that although no resolutions were planned, they would be considering the questions, “what is God calling us to be, what is God calling us to do, where is the Journey Forward taking us?”

Tom Yoder Neufeld, professor emeritus of religious studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, led the first of three daily Bible studies on Ephesians.

Describing the theme of his presentations, “Gathered into One,” he said: “This is a oneness that defies our imagination. It is nothing less than participating in the unity of God.”

He focused on the “peace poem” of Ephesians 2:14-16.

Because God is a successful gatherer, God’s unity is full of diversity.

“It takes every ounce of skill, patience and especially love to cope with the success of God’s gathering,” Yoder Neufeld said. “Unity is hard work. Blame it on God!”

Though “our world is torn by fear of what or who is strange or different,” he said, “let’s not point the finger too quickly at the world” — because Anabaptists also participate in a culture of suspicion, shaming or shunning those whose views or behaviors we disdain.

“Mennonites have got separation down,” Yoder Neufeld said. Noting that we recognize injustices like sexism and racism, “maybe we add schism to the isms that are problems for us... Let’s put the ceaseless struggle for unity at the core of our understanding of discipleship.”

Returning to the theme of God’s problem-creating success as a gatherer of diverse people, he said, “The church is a mess,” and the delegates responded, “Thanks be to God!”

### **The state of the church**

Glen Guyton, MC USA executive director, addressed delegates on the state of the church.

“The church is changing — not just Mennonite Church USA but the body of Christ,” he said. “The world’s view of us is changing, and the question is, how will we respond? Will we remain relevant, or will internal politics distract us from our vision of healing and hope?”

Guyton said he sees a lot of hope, “even in our disagreements.”

“I see trust building,” he said. “I get a renewed sense that people want to be connected to our historic peace church.”

He listed several things the denomination needs, including more resources of volunteers and money.

He said the denomination needs less structure — to move away from mechanical authority and toward relational authority.

The denomination needs to embrace the gifts of all generations and develop the next generation of leaders.

For years, Guyton said, the new denomination struggled with how to come together and then with how to be together.

“In the last few years we have wondered if we could stay together,” he said. “Now it is time to work together as Christ’s church, led by the Holy Spirit.”

The church, Guyton said, is “imagining new ways of being” and “living into our renewed commitments.”

### **If Jesus came to your town**

Delegates discussed those commitments as they continued the Journey Forward process that emerged from the Future Church Summit at Orlando 2017.

After Orlando, a team wrote a one-page document outlining three renewed commitments. These are summarized as: 1) follow Jesus; 2) witness to God’s peace; and 3) experience transformation.

Delegates spent 25 minutes around tables discussing what following Jesus means for them.

They responded to this question: “Based on how you read Scripture, if Jesus were to talk into your town today, where would he go, what would he say and what would he do?”

Many said Jesus would meet people in their places of need. He might go to the elementary school and listen to the children. He would question our priorities and worldly interests. He might say we’re not doing our job of feeding the poor and helping the immigrants.

After several delegates began their responses with “he would...” Phil Rempel of Albany Oregon, said, “Who says he’s a he this time?” and added, “He would say, blessed are you who love each other.”

July 4, 2019

Delegates study ‘unity of the Spirit,’ offer ideas for peacemaking



**7.4. 2019** Written By: Paul Schrag for Mennonite World Review **390** Times read

*Photo: Delegates in table discussion. Photo by Vada Snider.*

Mennonite Church USA delegates on July 4 studied the biblical vision for “unity of the Spirit” and offered ideas for the denomination’s peace witness.

Tom Yoder Neufeld’s Bible study focused on Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Emphasizing the definitions of spirit as “wind” and “breath,” he described God as bringing “unsettling, wind-driven” unity — the primal energy of creation — to the church.

“What if we thought of the church as the children of the wind?” he asked. “One thing you can’t do with wind is control it... The unity of the Spirit is this turbulent storm within God’s embrace. That’s what peace looks like until we all see God face to face together. If Jesus is God’s peace, then the peace we know today is the peace that is constantly being unsettled by its generosity toward enemies and strangers.”

Yoder Neufeld encouraged the delegates to “rejoice in our awkwardness” as the body of Christ.

“The body of Christ will never walk elegantly, but it will walk gracefully,” he said. “That is its perfection.”

Referring to the biblical image of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, he said this refers not to our individual bodies but to the church.

He asked: What building materials would we use to build a home for God? He said the walls of God's temple are made up of things people have thrown away.

This can be a difficult idea for those in the Anabaptist tradition who want a disciplined community "without spot or wrinkle."

"We have a hard time following Jesus out to the garbage heap to find building materials because that would unsettle the niceness of our building," Yoder Neufeld said.

"We should test whether we are a peace church by the hospitality we have toward each other... The church is a place of radical hospitality and also radical transformation."

### **Future of peace witness**

In the afternoon, delegates spent time in table groups discussing "what one part of our peace witness do we want to work on together for the next biennium?"

Summarizing their table group's ideas, several said responding to the immigration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border should be a priority.

Creation care as it relates to climate change was often mentioned. Citing the ability to give up conveniences we take for granted, Lily Mast of Boulder, Colorado, noted that Mennonites have a legacy of communal simplicity. "Mennonites know simple communal living is one of blessedness and abundance, not deprivation," she said.

Matt Lehman Wiens of Wichita, Kansas, suggested practicing radical hospitality, "breaking bread with people we disagree with."

Jill Schmidt of Denver, Colorado, suggested "creating a tangible action plan for how to mend relationships with churches that have left" the denomination.

Other ideas included practicing welcome toward LGBTQ people, responding to gun violence and helping congregations offer sanctuary to undocumented immigrants.

Robin Schilling of Blooming Glen, Pennsylvania, urged a strong scriptural foundation for peacemaking.

"We are extending Christ's peace, not our own peace," she said.

**JULY 5, 2019**

Delegates expand youth involvement, receive resolution on 'abuse of child migrants'



**7.5. 2019** Written By: Paul Schrag for Mennonite World Review

*Photo: Step Up participants, who today became voting delegates. Photo by Vada Snider.*

Youth gained a larger voice in Mennonite Church USA decisions July 5 as delegates approved a bylaw change allowing more 16- to 21-year-olds as voting delegates.

Congregations may now appoint one youth in addition to their regular number of delegates. Conferences and racial-ethnic groups may appoint two.

Eighteen youth already serving as nonvoting delegates in the Step Up program exchanged high-fives after being called to the stage as the assembly applauded the decision.

The bylaw change passed with six dissenting votes out of 495 delegates registered.

The Step Up participants said the older delegates had welcomed them.

“When I was brave enough to say something they listened by my opinions,” said Graciella Odelia of Philadelphia.

Alyssa Nolt of Shickley, Nebraska, said, “The delegates at my table have shown a positive response to including me and respecting me as an individual and hearing my thoughts.”

Aubrey McClanahan of Crawfordsville, Iowa, said, “I’m thankful to the people at my table for being patient with me and to Central Plains Conference for supporting me and preparing me to be a part of the bigger church.”

### **Resolution on migrants proposed**

Also on July 5, leaders announced a resolution developed by delegates during the convention. A “Churchwide Statement on the Abuse of Child Migrants” received the required 50 signatures and will come to a vote Saturday morning.

The resolution condemns “the treatment of immigrants families and children at the border, as well as around the nation, [as] a horrific violation of the Image of God and God-given human rights.”

“We stand against the traumatic separation of families, the deprivation of basic human needs and the detention of migrants,” the resolution says.

It calls the denomination to “stand alongside the undocumented members of our denomination” and to “seek connections with immigrant communities in our contexts and to support those in sanctuary and the thousands of families whose loved ones have been deported.”

### **Membership Guidelines**

Michael Danner, associate executive director for church vitality and engagement, gave an update on discernment about the Membership Guidelines, which have been a point of contention due to their regulations on same-sex marriage.

Delegates were asked to discuss at their tables and respond in writing whether their constituents considered it important to have “a two-year biblical discernment process, culminating in a delegate decision on the status of the MC USA Membership Guidelines in 2021,” and whether the constituents would give time and energy to that process.

A plan for a two-year discernment process is being drafted, with input from LGBTQ advocacy groups, Danner said.

### **July 6, 2019**

Mennonite Church USA condemns abuse of child migrants, affirms new leadership, reflects on transformation of the Holy Spirit



*MC USA delegates vote to pass a churchwide statement that condemns the treatment of migrant children on Sat. July 6.*

KANSAS CITY, Missouri (Mennonite Church USA) — Early Saturday morning on July 6, the 495 delegates from Mennonite churches around the country gathered at the Kansas City Convention Center to discuss and vote on the [Churchwide Statement on the Abuse of Child Migrants](#), which had been introduced to the Delegate Assembly a day earlier. The resolution passed with just two people dissenting.

“As a historic peace church founded on the principle that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection call Christians into reconciled, righteous, and right relationship, Mennonite Church USA finds the treatment of immigrant families and children at the border, as well as around the nation, a horrific violation of the Image of God and God-given human rights,” the statement’s summary reads.

The statement says that Mennonite Church USA delegates “stand against the traumatic separation of families” and “call for a change in policy and action by the United States government.”

“This resolution gives us language that we can use with confidence that we are expressing the corporate witness of our church in our work,” said David Boshart, moderator of MC USA.

Boshart noted [an article in that week’s New York Times](#) that shared the stories of immigrants who have received enormous fines from ICE for taking sanctuary in churches, including Columbus Mennonite Church in Columbus, Ohio, and Chapel Hill Mennonite Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Samuel Voth Schrag, chair of the Resolutions Committee, gave a short presentation around updating the resolution’s language after receiving feedback.

After delegates discussed the final resolution at tables, several responses were raised at the mic that illustrated a diversity of perspectives from across the church, though nearly everyone began by noting their support of the resolution.

Several people advocated for including a list of resources for how to get involved and actions that could be taken along with the resolution, encouraging the group to take action when they return to their home churches. A delegate from San Antonio Mennonite Church offered the [church’s Facebook page](#) as a place to find resources on how they have been working to assist migrants. One question centered on why the resolution focuses mostly on children when parents and single adults are suffering as well. Another delegate led the group in prayer over the document.

One delegate shared that while he supports the resolution because of how he understands Jesus calling us to treat individuals, he knows that a significant minority of his congregants will be unhappy with the resolution due to their concerns with what they see as the bigger issue of a broken immigration system. While one person expressed that they felt the word “condemning” was not in line with being a peace church, another person expressed that the language was too weak, that the church should use stronger language to name the ways the government is endangering children.

*“As disciples of Jesus called to care for those in need, we believe the actions of the U.S. government are unconscionable, and we condemn these practices and commit, as peacemakers, to building better processes for migrants,” the statement reads.*

## **Transition of Leadership**

The role of MC USA moderator was ceremonially transferred to Joy Sutter of Harleysville, Pennsylvania, who has served as moderator-elect for the past two years. Linda Dibble of Albany, Oregon, a chaplain and Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference leader, was introduced as MC USA’s new moderator-elect. The assembly prayed for “clarity, wisdom and good counsel” as they lead, and presented Dibble with a prayer shawl.

“This is only the second time in our history that two women are leading Mennonite Church USA,” said Sutter as delegates applauded.

This marked the final day of David Boshart's term as moderator following 12 years of service on the Executive Board. "Dave's leadership has been a true blessing," said Sutter.

### **Journey Forward: the presence of the Holy Spirit**

During their final round of storytelling and table group discussion, delegates shared about where they have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

"We have not arrived. We are not yet fully formed, but God is faithful on the journey," said Jon Carlson, member of the Journey Forward Writing Team as he introduced the final Journey Forward topic: experiencing the transformation of the Spirit.

"We know that where the Spirit goes may be the wrong direction according to our own understanding," said Natalie Francisco, discussion facilitator and member of the Journey Forward Writing Team. She said that while it's important to make plans to know where we're going, as God's people we need to make ourselves "open to the suddenly factor."

Delegates shared vulnerably during open mic time about "holy moments" in their lives.

"I came to convention with a lot of trepidation," said Scott Peterson, pastor and delegate representing Trinity Mennonite Fellowship in Phoenix, Arizona. "I did not see a way forward for MC USA. I saw a lot of fear and a lot of mistrust."

*"But I have been amazed and impressed," he continued. "MC USA seems like a place where God's Spirit is alive, and I can't put a finger on why that is. I don't have answers, but I feel like there's a path. God's spirit is moving us through the weeds to a place where there is rest and reconciliation available."*