

A report on conference and convention

Indiana Michigan Conference

“Delegates met around tables of 6-8 to become acquainted with the issues for consideration by the whole body. The first was the proposed ‘Renewing a Vision’, a conference policy statement intended to enhance relationships and communications among the leadership and IN-MI churches. Because the Breadth of Variance section explored possible ways to respond to LGBT relationships I was fearful that the whole statement would fail because of its suggested practical applications. My fellow delegate, from a sister congregation, responded by lashing out against the acceptance of LGBT as unscriptural. Furthermore he stated that should ‘Renewing a Vision’ stand he will urge his congregation to withdraw its affiliation with Indiana-Michigan Conference. Later the IN-MI delegates adopted the statement with a 78% positive tally. I have not learned what has transpired with the congregation referenced above.”

James E Horsch, CMC convener

“Serving as acting moderator of IMMC this past year provided me a different window into our Annual Sessions than most people. There was countless hours of planning, preparation, prayer, nervousness, anxiety, and so on. But what stood out to me this year was the movement and activity of the Holy Spirit, particularly when the ‘unplanned efforts’ showed up as we set aside some of our pre-delegate meeting plans. Then to hear people comment on how powerful those times were really affirmed that perhaps we as leaders were paying attention to the Spirit's leading. The other aspect that stood out to me was how much delegates simply enjoy being together in worship and around tables to discuss with one another.”

Bob Yoder, IN-MI conference acting moderator

Mennonite Church USA Convention in Orlando

“Scott Roth said, ‘To be a disciple, you need to love God AND love others.’ That was a really meaningful quote to me because too often I see churches and people around me calling themselves perfect Christians without putting anything into practice. You can’t be self-righteous and make disciples of God at the same time. That just isn’t how Christianity works.”

Priya Sommers, MYF

“I really appreciated the worship service where we talked about our hearts like a cup. If we have a broken heart (a cracked cup) then it is full for a little bit, but quickly it empties out again. The only way to get a full heart is to ask God to give you a ‘new heart’ and ask for forgiveness.”

Jonah Hochstetler, MYF

“I am thriving.’ This was my response to someone asked me how I was doing during the July 4-8 Mennonite Convention in Orlando. This is because, for me, Mennonite Convention is far more than delegate business and resolutions. It’s about relationships, renewing old ones, building new ones, networking with partners in the gospel of our Lord. This happened not only in the formal events such as worship, delegate sessions, and workshops, but also in informal contexts: the halls, lunch table, exhibit halls, and even elevators. So for me, convention highlights included:

- building friendships with the delegates at my delegate table: two capable MYFers, a conference moderator, a member of a MCUSA committee, a university student, a young preacher who migrated from another denomination, and a bi-vocational Latino pastor from South Texas;
- hearing Rachel Held Evans remind us that our call is to love at all costs rather than be right at all cost;

- hearing Phil Kniss remind us to love like God loves with presence, advocacy, and direction, in that order;
- voting with the majority of delegates to approve a resolution on Palestine and Israel (*the only resolution*);
- exploring the future with fellow delegates in the historic Future Church Summit;
- meeting with Tanzanian Mennonite leaders;
- seeing persons from the LGBTQ community share insights and gifts on the leaders’ platform (*first time in history to the best of my memory*);
- engaging in conversations and fellowship with friends, old and new.

As in previous conventions, I was reminded that I/we really do belong to the larger church and that we at CMC have many partners across this land with whom we share the same Christ, the same calling, and the same values. I was reminded that I/we am/are loved by God, that we, as individuals and together, are called to pass on God’s love, and that, with the convention theme, ‘love is a verb.’”

Ron Kennel, CMC delegate

“As a first time attendee of the MC USA convention, and a first to serve as a delegate, I found the experience to be both exciting, emotionally draining at times, but also hopeful. I’ve been to many conferences and gatherings of Mennonites in my professional work, but serving both College Mennonite Church in the delegate sessions and Mennonite Health Services in the Future Church sessions was a bit overwhelming at times. Maybe it was the way that the church manages decision-making and processing of opinions that was surprising to me. Or maybe it was the way that as a small table group we could be so united, but then as a larger body, when asked to vote, we could be so fragmented and lose our points of agreement. (*cont.*)”

I was happy that the Israeli/Palestine resolution was passed. Once that was completed, and we moved into the Future Church session, I was excited by the positive approach that was taken in how we look at the strengths of our church and also what unites us. There was so much in our looking at why we are church together, why we are Anabaptist and what we care about, that was invigorating and community-building. Spending time on lamenting the past was so necessary, but emotionally draining. Overall, visioning for the Mennonite Church and the future made me optimistic and hopeful. It is my prayer that the information and insights gathered at the convention will provide future direction for MC USA.”

Karen Lehman, CMC delegate

“I had the privilege of being one of the 5 adults that went with 23 youth from College Mennonite to the MC USA convention in Orlando. We had a wonderful week in worship, at seminars, in small group times, at a service project, and walking around and eating together while we focused on the Convention theme ‘Love is a Verb.’ After convention we drove to Fort Myers and visited our sister church Arca de Salvacion and had a great time connecting with them and relaxing on the beach.

We have a diverse group of youth. And in our daily lives there is a lot of coming and going because the youth have different schedules. At one of our convention prep meetings it happened that two youth who are regulars met for the first time. Their school year schedules are so different that they were never at Sunday school or Wednesday night at the same time.

This diversity was not a negative thing as we went to convention. It was an opportunity to get to know other people and learn about how God is at work in their lives. Everyone had the attitude that ‘God loves me deeply, and God loves you just as much as God loves me.’

I was blessed to be part of the Future Church Summit and some of the

delegate sessions, along with being at the youth convention.

The Future Church Summit was 15 hours of meeting around tables where delegates and other constituency representatives from across MC USA were led through a process of looking at our past and discerning where God is leading us into the future. There is a lot that could be said about the process and the outcomes, and you can find all of that in various Mennonite publications.

I had an epiphany moment during the Future Church Summit. As we collectively looked back at our history and lamented what was not seen on the timeline, we recognized our denomination’s white privilege, a strange thing to face for a people who strive for justice and reconciliation. People asked, ‘Where are our leaders who are Latino, Native American, Asian, African-American, LGBTQ, people who don’t have a European Mennonite last name?’ I personally as a white, male, Mennonite, with the last name of Yoder felt convicted by this question. What am I doing to recognize my privilege and share the power of that privilege with others? And then I thought of the youth from College Mennonite. The group of youth that represented us at the convention. In that group we have youth who do not have European Mennonite last names. We have youth who are Asian, Native American, African American, Hispanic, LGBTQ. And we have youth with other minority distinctions that were not mentioned in that broad context of representatives of MC USA. The depth of diversity that I heard MC USA longing for at the Future Church Summit is found right now in the youth of College Mennonite Church. Thanks be to God!

This is God’s work seen in us. The only way I can describe how this happened is with the convention theme, ‘Love is a Verb’. God is Love. Love must be active. And when God’s love is active in us any potential dividing wall is seen, recognized, and removed so that the love of Christ is not hindered.

God is changing the narrative of who College Mennonite Church is. Our beliefs and our convictions are not changing, but our collective skin color is. To me that sounds a lot like the Kingdom of God at work in us. Gloria a Dios!”

Daniel Yoder, MYF sponsor

“The Orlando Delegate Assembly was structured very differently than delegate assemblies in the past. The one ‘item of business’ revolved around the unfinished business of the 2015 assembly in Kansas City, that of affirming a resolution related to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and the violence that has erupted in that ‘holy’ land.

I am pleased to report that after two years of intentional education, the church passed the Israel/Palestine Resolution with resounding conviction. Participating in this vote (and the processing ahead of the vote) felt entirely different from 2015 when the sense was that the majority of the delegates were ill informed about the realities of Israel and Palestine. This time it felt like people had done their homework. And the result revealed mature awareness of the realities that impact Israelis and Palestinians at this time in our history. The resolution calls for all of us to continue to foster increased understanding of both the occupation and the history of anti-semitism in our churches and in our land. This process (complete with significant work around education) was an example of good news growing out of the Mennonite Church.

The bulk of the remainder of the MC USA 2017 Delegate session revolved around an experiential, representative dreaming process called ‘The Future Church Summit.’ Throughout this process table groups (made up of diverse representation of those present, including young adults who participated in the Step Up program) shared, listened and dreamed together. Feedback from table groups was processed in an almost simultaneous process via technology. (*cont.*)

Large group processes provided opportunity to hear from a wide range of voices coming from the platform. I am glad that I had the opportunity to participate in ‘The Future Church Summit’. The unconventional process of hearing from a widely representational body of the Mennonite Church USA was, in many ways, inspiring. It was inspiring to hear young people give voice to their sense of meaning as they participate in the Mennonite Church.

It was inspiring to hear honest reflection on our past and humble recognition of mistakes that have been made along the way. It was inspiring to dream together about how the broader church might function in life-giving ways going forward into an unknown, but undoubtedly very different future. It was inspiring to hear voices of previously marginalized people and people groups, finding a place on the platform, sharing their perspectives with integrity and hopeful honesty.

The closing delegate session proved less than satisfactory, as time for incorporating what had transpired during the Future Church Summit was too limited. The result was a hasty process that left many on the margins feeling unheard and disrespected, once again.

Overall, Orlando ‘17 felt considerably more kind and generous than did Kansas City ‘15. I am hopeful that we are making progress as we engage in the slow work of God in the world.”

Gwen Gustafson-Zook, delegate

“Convention helped me feel closer to God. I also had tons of fun hanging out with our MYF.”

Sarah Hochstetler, MYF

“I eagerly anticipated participating in the Future Church Summit, and the experience exceeded my expectations. Here we focused on what holds us together instead of what divides us. We were a much more diverse group, with persons from constituency groups such as African American Mennonite Association, Iglesia Menonita Hispana,

Mennonite Women USA, Native Mennonite Ministries, and LGBTQ support groups supplementing the delegate body.

In about ninety tables of eight people each, we talked about things like ‘What draws us to this faith?’ ‘Significant learnings from our history’; ‘Things that we affirm and take forward’; ‘Things to lament, transform, and/or let go’; ‘How can we be constructive in living with our differences?’; ‘What can we take action on in response to the world’s needs?’ and ‘What does it mean for us to follow Jesus as Anabaptists in the 21st century?’

Meanwhile, a ‘theme team’ compiled responses from the table groups in real time via iPad posts, so that they could give us a summary report within minutes after each session. Although things were a little messy procedurally in the delegate session when we received the summit report, we nonetheless affirmed the work of the summit and commended the theme team’s report to the MC USA executive board and offered it to the church ‘to guide further discernment for living in God’s calling in agencies, conferences, constituency groups and congregations.’

(Read the theme team’s report at <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/future-church-summit-outcomes-report/>)

The experience filled me with hope for the future of our denomination. It was also a hopeful sign for me that I was the oldest person at my table group and that there were a lot of younger Mennonites on the convention floor committed to and engaged in the work of the church.

I was also impressed by the process that led to a resolution on ‘Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine.’ This followed a resolution on Israel-Palestine that was tabled in Kansas City ‘15. Since then a three-person writing committee prepared the resolution in consultation with a diverse, ten-person reference group and tested this resolution with a range of Palestinian, Israeli, and Jewish partners.

The resolution begins, ‘As followers of Jesus and his gospel of

reconciliation, we long for peace, security, justice, and flourishing of all people living in Israel-Palestine,’ and goes on to call us ‘to address both military occupation and antisemitism. As we acknowledge our own complicity in this web of violence, injustice, and suffering. As we acknowledge our own complicity in this web of violence, injustice, and suffering, we will strive, by God’s grace, to take concrete steps to address these wrongs.’

The full resolution and related resources are available at <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/mennoncon-2017-orlando/>. Also on that page you can download the Orlando Squeeze, the convention newsheet that recaps each day’s activities. And the daily news/updates from The Mennonite have a lot of good information, although I couldn’t find a place where they are all accessible. I received them as a subscriber to TMail.”

Don Garber, delegate



**College
Mennonite
Church**

A welcoming congregation
of Mennonite Church USA

Emily Kauffman, compiler and editor