

The MennoNet - September 2017



Newsletter of the First Mennonite Church of Richmond, Virginia

This newsletter is devoted to the Mennonite Youth and Adult Conference that was held from July 4th to 8th in Orlando, Florida. Six of our youth and several adults, including our Pastor (Ryan Ahlgrim) and his wife (Laurie) attended. Our youth led a worship service when they returned. Here are their reflections.

Youth Report from MC-USA Convention

Thomas Addison (see photo below)

The Exhibit Hall was filled with booths from twenty seven different Mennonite organizations, such as: Mennonite Higher Education, National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund, African-American Mennonite Association, Doctrine of Discovery, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Men, Mennonite Church USA, and Goshen College. Some of these groups provided information about colleges and others wanted to raise awareness about their causes, like with the National Campaign for Peace Tax Fund—at the Mennonite Higher Education booth. They argued that paying tax for war is the same as participating in it. The Higher Education Group also organized the *Find Your Match* game. Their booth consisted of a group of six Mennonite colleges and universities that came together to share each school's academic information with Mennonite teenagers. To attract future college-age youth, the *Find Your Match* game worked like this: 1) You registered for the game; 2) You received a pamphlet that had information in it about one of the programs; (3) You copied down the information on a piece of paper and hung it up on a wall. (4) Finally, you would try to find the person with the information that matches your educational interests and try to talk with them. Another game that Nick, Sam, Ben, Olivia, Eliza and I played, had to do with collecting pins. The way it worked was simple; the one who got the most pins won.

The most interesting thing I experienced was in a seminar called, "The Universal Muslim Questions to Christians." The speaker, David W. Shenk, was interesting to listen to and helped me realize that Christians and Muslims look at each other through clouded vision. There are many things Muslims could learn from us and things they could teach us. This seminar covered a lot of good information and I was happy to learn. I am glad for the Exhibit Hall and the Seminars I attended.



Eliza Wrenn (see photo below)

When at the convention, we volunteered at the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, which is a private, nonprofit organization that collects, stores, and distributes donated food. Last year, they distributed 52 million meals. We participated with about 50 other people to create “disaster relief boxes.” These boxes are made to be sent to areas struck by floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes. We were all assigned to work on a sort of “assembly line,” each person with something different to pack into the box as it made its way down the line. I packed canned beef stew, and Olivia packed squeeze tubes of grape jelly. Some volunteers taped the boxes once they had all they needed in them, and some folded boxes so we could fill them. In total, we made about 150 disaster relief boxes.

Everyone filed into their seats for worship services almost every morning and afternoon. The praise & worship songs began, stopped, and continued again. Breaks were taken to make special points of lines in songs and to share stories of hardship and love during every worship services. And, as expected, one song stopped, and another song started. But, one memorable time, no instruments followed the first words. A beautiful hymn rang through the auditorium, with everyone’s voices alone, and no instrumental backing. I’m sure you all are familiar with “Going Down to the River.” This tune itself is wonderful, but this moment was beautiful and raw, and I could feel everyone’s metaphorical warmth radiate from, and bounce off of one another. Olivia and I sang this tune on the walk back to the hotel that night and the night after that. I’ll never forget it.



Ben Reinford (see photo below)

Favorite things about the Rec Room

- Meet new people
- Play in a noncompetitive environment (Kinda)
- Basketball, soccer, gaga ball, spike ball, four square, badminton, pickle, volleyball, ultimate frisbee, flag football and sharbade
- Board and card games
- Multiple people walked up and asked if they could join our game of four square or sharbade. And on the other side, we were welcomed into others games
- Spent several long nights there
- Went there during our breakout session one day
- Played four square for about 3 hours

Breakout Favorites:

How to use the power of social media to change the world?

- “Social” means interacting with people
- “Media” means the sharing of information
- Social media isn’t only digital (caveman drawings)

Four rules of social media

1. Let your word be impeccable (make it one sided)
2. Don’t make assumptions
3. Don’t take anything personally
4. Always do your best



Two places to change your world: Globally and Locally

- Globally: Find your tribe, Lead, and Focus on passion and mission
- Locally: Be open, Be curious, and Be persistent

Memorable quote: “Leadership is a choice, it’s the choice to not do nothing.” Seth Godin

Olivia Harrison (see photo below)

Throughout the week, there were four sessions a day that were available for us. They ranged from topics on Muslim-Christian relations, to acting up in church, to social media and loving your non-Christian friends. Eliza and I went to quite a few, and some of our favorites included “Sustainable Living is Joy-filled Living,” “Are You Smarter than Your Phone?” and “Mennonites and the Police,” which was my personal favorite. The speaker was Joe Miller, who has worked on a police force for a number of years. He talked mainly about his journey in being OK with police potentially using force. He explained that you can decide for yourself, for example by thinking about how you would react if someone were to break into your home at 2 in the morning. Would you call the police? If so, this means that you are OK with them potentially using force on your behalf. During the session, a current policeman and his wife shared a few words and held a short Q&A session, which involved questions about the stereotypes of being a law-enforcement officer.

All the sessions that we went to provided a lot of insight on the various topics, and have given me a lot to think about. My most memorable moment happened at the end of the week, during the last nighttime worship service. Glo-sticks were passed around and everyone in the auditorium sang, “This Little Light of Mine,” while waving their lights were in the air. I thought it was beautiful to look around the room and see everyone’s individual light creating and radiating one cumulative glow that we all shared, representing our love.



Pastor Ryan Ahlgrim's Report from the MC-USA Convention

"Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine"

The delegates to Mennonite Church USA Convention in Orlando (July 4-8) made two major decisions. The first was approving the resolution: "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine." This resolution seeks to strike a balance between standing up for the rights of dispossessed Palestinians, while also honoring Jews and the nation of Israel. In summary, it calls on Mennonites to oppose Israel's occupation and expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, confess and renounce antisemitism and any complicity in the Holocaust, support nonviolent Palestinian and Jewish peacemakers, and develop constructive relationships with Jewish and Palestinian communities in the U.S.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the resolution is its call to "avoid the purchase of products associated with acts of violence or policies of military occupation, including items produced in settlements," and for Mennonite financial services (Everence) to withdraw "investments from companies that are profiting from the occupation." The resolution is not advocating a boycott or divestment of Israel, but specifically of the Israeli occupation and settlements in Palestinian territories.

The reasons for the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians are complex. Americans tend to have a one-sided or shallow understanding of the issues involved. The resolution calls on us to become better informed and to set aside stereotypes. The resolution takes no stand on whether the solution to the conflict should be two states, one state, or something else. That decision is up to the peacemakers there to figure out. Before delegates voted on the resolution, Rabbi Brant Rosen, representing the Rabbinical Council of Jewish Voices for Peace, and Alex Awad, a Palestinian Christian pastor and professor, urged the delegates to support the resolution. It passed with about 98% support.

"Future Church Summit Report and Pastor's Discussion"

The second major decision by delegates was to approve the "Future Church Summit" report. This was a 10+ hour structured conversation involving hundreds of Mennonites at the Convention. The goal was to come up with a consensus of what we want the Mennonite Church to become. In recent years, some conferences and many congregations have pulled out of MC-USA. The question on everyone's mind was: "What should be our identity and mission in order to have unity and move ahead?" This report summarizes the table discussions and is meant to guide the church into the 21st century.

My own summary of that report is that we continue to affirm that we are a church that prizes mutual caring and community, the centrality of Jesus' life and teachings, and being a peace church that lives out its faith through service and justice. We are a priesthood of believers. We sing our theology by making music together, and interpreting Scripture together through the lens of Jesus.

As we move forward, this report affirms our nonconformity to materialism and nationalism and our commitment to simple living. We celebrate being a multicultural/racial and diverse church; we let go of racism and being white-centric; we want to avoid boundaries that exclude and painful patterns of division; we lament and want to change the marginalization of LGBTQ persons. We will create alternative, counter-cultural communities, immerse ourselves in prayer and scripture, partner with the global church, and continue to change and adapt while still remaining distinctive. The report affirms our “quirkiness.” I was pleased to see in this report that the essential principles I was brought up to believe are still core to what is being Mennonite: the centrality of Jesus, community, service, and peacemaking. I was glad to see openness, inclusion, and diversity being prized. The delegates overwhelmingly passed the report and hoped for the continuing guidance of the church. Copies of both of these reports are available on the table in the Commons, on the MC-USA website, or from me.

The contentious debates that I heard at Columbus eight years ago (my last convention) were absent this time. The church, as reflected in the delegates present in Orlando, is mostly ready to move on. The young pastors I met are chomping at the bit for radical discipleship and a more activist church. Older pastors are keen to combine that passion with wisdom. I look forward to the future of MC-USA.

Who Is My Neighbor?

Luke 10: 25-37



The Newsletter of First Mennonite Church of Richmond. Editors are Laurie Ahlgrim (laurieahlgrim@gmail.com) and Murray Ellison (ellisonms2@vcu.edu). This is Laurie's last issue as Lead Editor. Thanks for her hard work. Beginning with the next issue, Murray and Tina Eshleman will be the Editors. Please feel free to share ideas for articles and digital photos with us. Our church's address is 601 E. Parham Road. To request a digital or print copy, contact secretary@firstmennonitechurch.org. Our phone number is 804-264-3200.