

Listening Committee final report

See Minutes #15, 19 & 33

Live the Call!!

We heard this call in many different ways during the week. From the words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, to the speakers in worship services who called us to boldly live and proclaim the gospel as Mennonites/Anabaptists, we were challenged to “live the call.” We heard the call to deconstruct the walls between us, and beyond. Executive Director Jim Schrag called for Mennonite Church USA to be an audacious and daring church. We heard the call as we discussed the issue of discipline in the church; as we decided to take a first step toward the creation of a healthcare plan for all pastors and church workers; as we decided to join Christian Churches Together; as we revisited our priority to dismantle racism in God’s church; as we prayed for our brothers and sisters who are suffering in Colombia, Zimbabwe and Israel/Palestine. The call was also reflected in the resolution that came from the floor of the delegate session on National Identity about being deliberate concerning what it means to be God’s people as citizens of the superpower of the world. In our ending delegate session, we heard many wonderful ways in which God is moving and calling us in our local settings. We have heard the challenge to “Live the Call!”

Convention logistics

Several enterprising delegates noted that Mennonite Church USA could quickly replenish its coffers if someone would sell coffee and ice cream outside the delegate assembly hall. The temperature of the delegate hall, and the position of the projection screens were all things that we heard about. Even though there were some complaints about the food (including a wish for more California fruit), many expressed gratitude for the overall management of feeding so many people. Rarely did we need to wait in line for our meals. The maps in the program book weren’t always consistent, so that finding our way around at the beginning of the week was sometimes difficult. Some voiced the desire to have maps of the area included in the materials sent to delegates before arriving at the assembly site. Regret was expressed that international guests were not brought to the front for a more appropriate welcome.

We heard that the balance of table time and microphone time is an ongoing challenge in our deliberations. Some voiced that the time for table discussion was too short for the size of the topics to be discussed. Others asked for better direction to guide the discussion at tables.

Worship

We heard gratefulness for the talented musicians and the variety of music led in the worship services, although some expressed disappointment that the new songbook “Sing the Story” was not used. The number of youth who enthusiastically participated in the Wednesday hymn sing was noted, along with the hope that we not consider four-part unaccompanied singing a Mennonite artifact. We also heard concern and pain about a song that we sang following the DVD describing the injustices committed against Native Americans. In light of the many ways Christians throughout history have justified unjust and violent actions in the name of Jesus, many were not able to sing the words, “Let us get up and take this land. We are able to overcome, as conquerors in Jesus Christ.” We also heard many appeals to use gender neutral language and imagery for God in worship and singing.

Accessibility

We heard multiple calls for Mennonite Church USA to keep working at breaking down walls. Some delegates expressed concerns that conventions are not accessible for persons with few economic resources. Others lamented that gay and lesbian persons are not embraced in our gatherings.

Mennonite Church USA

Affirmation was expressed that agencies understand their role as one of equipping congregations for mission. We noted that the print materials from Executive Leadership and our agencies reflect a more diverse church, and we recognize the opportunities and challenges that come with diversity. Delegates seem to have good understanding of the role of each agency, although the role of the Executive Leadership office is less clear.

Convention planning, MMA's sharing fund, and Third Way Café were mentioned as programs familiar to and appreciated by delegates. *'Gather Round* Sunday School curriculum is appreciated by many, but some find it difficult to use in their contexts.

Anti-racism priority

We noted that Racial/Ethnic people were not well represented in the delegate body. We recognize the ongoing work and the many different perspectives about the issue of dismantling racism in God's church. Our commitment to this priority must include automatic and functional translation equipment for those in our church for whom English is not their first language. We heard sincere thanks for those who did work to provide Spanish translation throughout the week's deliberations, including some who translated at their tables for Spanish speaking brothers and sisters. We heard concern that some continue to use language of "us" and "them" when talking about the church. We also heard that while building relationships across barriers is important, a larger concern is the ways racism is evident in our systems. May we continue to be open to opportunities for further education about racism in our midst.

Young Adult Delegates (YODA)

We heard that there were more young adult delegates at this assembly and that they felt welcomed and included in table discussions. We heard appreciation from some young adults for the opportunities they have been given to participate in the life of the church (local and beyond). We also heard a call from them to join them as mentors and fellow disciples on the road – especially as they ask questions they have about faith and life. We heard that young adults have a diversity of views about how well the church has done at creating space for them. Some would welcome the opportunity to have a young adult representative on the Executive Board. Others would love to see an event planned specifically for young adult pastors – the "20-something" pastors in our midst. We got a preview of the Bike Movement documentary that will be released this fall. We heard the desire from young adults to be involved in the task force for the implementation of the National Identity resolution. We heard numerous young adults named as those gifted for pastoral leadership in our churches.

Native American resolution

While we heard unanimous support for the Native American resolution, some delegates wished there had been more opportunity for discussion and discernment before the action was taken. Some lamented that we did not use the word "repentance" to talk about ways we have been complicit in injustices that have harmed Native American communities. Others wanted to be sure that actions will follow our apology.

Care for the environment

Appreciation was expressed for the careful Biblical work in the presentation concerning the need to care for the earth. We heard numerous concerns about how we use resources at conventions. We heard the call to use less paper during delegate sessions, and to find ways to cut down on waste. Others called for an energy-use audit at conventions. Some have noted that our youth care about these issues and are paying attention. We were grateful for recycle bins provided by the convention center.

Healthcare access resolution

We sensed that, generally, there was strong support for the healthcare proposal, although we heard a call from many delegates for more details. We heard the encouragement that mutual aid is the central call of this initiative. We heard the call to consult and process early on with our larger congregations whose contributions to this plan will be most significant and important. We heard the concern that we not abandon our efforts to advocate for public policy so that many more can benefit from access to healthcare in our country. We heard repeatedly the fear that this plan will still leave many without healthcare coverage, and we heard the call to remember God's promise and power to heal.

Church Member Profile

Many expressed concern about the declining numbers and aging trends of Mennonite Church USA. Also noted was the low number of Mennonite members who consider themselves committed to peace and nonviolence. Many voiced that this survey serves as a wake-up call for our denomination. Some wished that we would have

spent more time with the realities reflected in the Church Member Profile, giving time and energy to discernment around the impact of these trends in our church.

Call to prayer and action

We heard the call to incorporate more intercessory prayer into delegate work time. In addition to inviting table groups to pray together, the places and times of prayer meetings during the week could be better announced. We heard the call to pray and write letters to our national leaders on behalf of those suffering in Zimbabwe, in Colombia, in Israel/Palestine. We heard concern that the war in Iraq and the issues surrounding the immigration issue in our country were not on our agenda.

An audacious church . . .

Picking up on Jim Schrag's call to be an audacious church, delegates reflected on what the Spirit is saying to us and began to sketch out what an audacious church might look like:

- An audacious church will repent from its sins. Delegates believe the profile data suggests that, in many ways, we are lukewarm and have lost our first love. We have failed to distinguish between the American dream and the dream of God's kingdom.
- An audacious church will reclaim its identity. It will celebrate and strengthen its distinctive calling. It will rekindle its commitments to Christ-centered life in the Spirit; to evangelism; to following Jesus in the way of peace; and to building community. It will resist the lure of materialism and militarism that are so dominant in our American culture.
- An audacious church will listen more carefully to Racial/Ethnic congregations to learn why they are growing and what makes their faith more vibrant. It will also call and enable more Racial/Ethnic leaders to serve in denominational leadership roles.
- An audacious church will find creative ways to support youth in their decisions for nonviolence. It might, for example, offer college scholarships in exchange for service to the church.
- An audacious church will be more deliberate about developing younger leaders and providing Anabaptist theological training for our pastors.
- An audacious church will find new ways to care for and witness to a hurting world. For example, it might find ways to care for wounded and traumatized soldiers who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan – just as the church developed mental health facilities during the World War II era.
- An audacious church will clearly communicate a relevant and life-changing message in the midst of a pluralistic society.
- An audacious church will invite new Mennonites to inform our outreach strategies.
- An audacious church will invite our global partners to come here as missionaries.
- An audacious church will provide ways for congregations to partner and learn from global brothers and sisters.
- An audacious church will not be afraid to preach and teach the good news of Jesus Christ from a Mennonite/Anabaptist perspective.

Thank you!

Delegates expressed thanks to the conferences on the Pacific coast for sharing their globally flavored kingdom life with us. We are grateful to experience these fresh voices in our midst. We also heard heartfelt thanks for the many, many people who work behind the scenes to make this kind of a week work as well as it does! One delegate received this unsolicited comment from the Marriott Hotel staff on Friday morning: "The Mennonite group has been a pleasure to host! The youth have been good and well behaved. The Mennonites show Christ in their lives."

Respectfully submitted,

San Jose 2007 Listening Committee: J. Daryl Byler, Yvonne Platts, Noel Santiago, Charlotte Hardt and Jane Hooper Peifer, chair