



# Heritage Sunday

October 26, 2014



## **Youth in the Mennonite Church: Recognizing the unique needs, gifts and wisdom of young Mennonites, past and present**

### **Introduction**

This year on Heritage Sunday, Mennonite Church USA invites congregations to remember the gifts that young people have offered to our church. We know that young people are a vital part of any healthy congregation and over the years, through various efforts, congregations have sought to nurture and empower each generation to be bold workers in God's kingdom. This Heritage Sunday, we remember the initiatives Mennonites have taken over the years to minister to and nurture the young in their midst. We also remember the voices of the young themselves as active members of church life from one generation to the next.

Mennonite young people, particularly since the Late-19th Century, have benefited from numerous youth-oriented church programs such as Sunday School, Youth Bible Meetings, Mennonite Youth Fellowship, and a myriad of conferences, educational, service and mission programs. Heritage Sunday may be a time for congregations to highlight specific youth programs that were especially meaningful at various points in their own congregational history.

Each generation also brings with it the inevitability of change. Sometimes change may be small or welcomed easily. However, often change is difficult and painful. Though conflict and change are certainly not always drawn along generational lines, change does often consist of a struggle to determine whether wisdom lies in the new or the old; innovation or tradition; the future or the past. The worship resources for this Heritage Sunday are intended to create space for congregations to listen for young voices and to encourage all generations to earnestly search for wisdom together.

## Scripture

Job 32: 1-22

Proverbs 3:1-24

Luke 22:24-27

## Singing

Here in this place (*Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #6)

Long before my journey's start (*Sing the Journey*, #36)

Jesus, help us live in peace (*Sing the Story*, # 52)

## Call to Worship

Adapted from Psalm 90

**Leader: Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
throughout all generations.**

**Left:** Before the mountains were born  
or you brought forth the whole world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

**Right:** A thousand years in your sight  
are like a day that has just gone by,  
or like a watch in the night.

**Leader: Gather us in to dwell in your unfailing love, O God.**

**Left:** Gather us in, we who are young and whose lives are a mystery.

**Right:** Gather us in, we who are old and who yearn for your face.

**Leader:** You, O God, have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Amen.

## Storytelling

### The Mennonite Young People's Conference Movement, 1919-1923

*Have the worship leader introduce the historical reading while the four readers take their spots.*

#### Introduction:

This morning, as part of Heritage Sunday, we remember the gifts that each generation of young people has brought to our church. We have set aside part of our worship time for storytelling. The story that we will hear today is the story of a movement of young people beginning in 1919 that made a lasting impact in the Mennonite church. This movement, known as the Young People's Conference Movement, is a testimony to the potential of young leaders in the church. It is also a reminder of the challenges and conflict that can arise with the dreams of a new generation. We will listen to the story of the Young People's Conference as a testimony to God's spirit among us in the past, and as a way of helping us to recognize signs of God's work among us today.

## Reader 1



My name is **Jacob C. Meyer**. I was a conscientious objector in World War I. Since the Mennonite Church did not have alternative service opportunities at that time, I was sent to a military camp where I tried to witness to Jesus' message of peace by refusing to take up arms. When I looked around at the situation in my camp; when I thought of my friends, other young people in the Mennonite Church; and when I looked at the crisis our country and world was in, I saw tremendous opportunity. A generation of young Mennonites was coming of age: waiting and ready to offer something to the world. The world was devastated by war, in great need of spiritual and physical renewal. Now if only the Mennonite Church could get organized to develop and utilize the talent of its young men and women!

Dozens of other young Mennonites also saw the same opportunity to make an impact. Around 50 of us signed up to go to France at the end of the war to start reconstruction work. While we were there, our vision for what the Mennonite Church could offer its young people and, in turn, the world, became clearer.

We held a conference in June 1919 while we were still in France and called it the Mennonite Young People's Conference. The conference was such a grand success that upon returning to the United States we held 3 more Young People's Conferences. We summarized the mission of our movement, saying,

*"We believe that the young people of the Mennonite Church have a place, a power and possibility which must be developed. We believe in the function of the Young People's Conference to serve Christ and the church by strengthening the spiritual life of young people by acquainting them with the needs of the world and with the tasks of the Church and by calling them to a greater church loyalty, a more consecrated service and more adequate preparation."*

## Reader 2



My name is **Crissie Yoder Shank**. I was asked to be a speaker for the Young People's Conference when it came back to the United States. I was excited about the Young People's Conference Movement not only because it was a movement by and for young people, but because it gave us a mission to grab onto—a way to be Mennonite in our changing world. Many of us in the Young People's Conference Movement were smart, educated and strong leaders. We loved the Mennonite Church and believed that it had an important and distinctive message to offer. We were ready for spiritual renewal. We were ready to offer a more articulate and organized witness of what it means to be Christian in a time of war. We were ready to actively engage the needs we saw in the world around us through Christian service. We wanted to promote greater ecumenical ties between different Mennonite groups. We wanted to have special ministries for the young people of our church. We were even

ready to have women in leadership roles. The Young People's Conferences that we held were well attended and many young people were greatly encouraged by them.

But we felt increasingly scrutinized by the main leaders in the church for our efforts. From the very beginning, the young people who led the conferences were criticized by church leadership. Among the criticisms we received was that we had gone behind the back of church leadership in our organization and we did not have church endorsement. We also were accused of teaching false doctrine. We also were criticized for not giving attention to the lifestyle and dress standards that were common in the Mennonite Church at that time. We quickly realized that we and our conferences were getting swept up in a larger church debate between two camps under the labels of "fundamentalism" and "modernism."

We worked hard to avoid those polemics, but debate was heating up in the church so intensely that everything we did was evaluated on the basis of whether it seemed more "fundamentalist" or "modernist." In the midst of this pressure, we continued to hold conferences for three years, from 1920 to 1923.

1923 was a very difficult year for us and the church. The Young People's Conference disbanded. Goshen College, the school many of us attended, closed. Dozens of my friends and peers were so discouraged by the conflict that had been brewing over the last few years that we left our branch of the Mennonite Church for other Mennonite or Protestant denominations.

### Reader 3



My name is **Harold S. Bender**. Like Crissie, I attended the first Young People's Conference after reconstruction workers came back from France and got involved right away. I was impressed with the spiritual and intellectual vigor of the conferences and thought it was important to have such a space available for young Mennonites to fellowship, challenge and encourage one another. When I was made chairman of the executive committee of the conference, I plunged headfirst into the debates the movement was getting caught up in. I answered letters defending the conferences to its critics and wrote to church leaders to try win their support. I was insistent on doing what it would take to find a place for this movement of young people within the Mennonite Church.

However, some of my friends within the movement felt that in my effort to win church support, I had compromised the mission of the conferences and sold out on its vision. They felt that if the Mennonite Church couldn't accept them, they would just leave.

I felt differently. I would bend over backward to convince the church that the Young People's Conferences should be a vital part of church life. By the last conference in 1923, I had succeeded in winning the tentative approval of several church leaders who had previously opposed us. However, that tentative approval came too late. Many of the original visionaries of the conference movement had already moved on in the upset of 1923. It was a discouraging time and many of us felt that we had failed in our mission.

### Reader 4



My name is **Guy F. Hershberger**. Though many of my peers were leaders and participants in the Young People's Conferences, I never attended. At the time I was trying to remain at a safe distance from the movement because of their disputed reputation within the church. However, years later in 1966, I came across the Young People's Conference papers while I was doing research on post-World War 1 reconstruction work. As I read over the programs of the conferences and the correspondence of some of its organizers I was impressed by these visionary young people of early 1920s.

In my notes I wrote,

*"I am amazed at the far-reaching, progressive ideas discussed and suggestions made at the [Young People's Conference]. Most of the proposals are now realized in a real way, but at the time they were quite beyond the thinking of many people through the church."*

Particularly with regard to an ethic of service, peace witness, youth programs and ecumenical connections, the Mennonite Church eventually moved in many of the directions the Y.P.C. had articulated years earlier. Hindsight revealed that the legacy of the Y.P.C. movement lived on far beyond the three years during which it held its youth conferences.

Indeed, the vision of the Y.P.C. movement lived on, sometimes in surprising places. The young visionaries of the Y.P.C. went on to hold careers inside and outside the Mennonite church as pastors, professors, farmers and one as worker for the League of Nations. In 1926, one Y.P.C. leader, Harold Bender, founded a new periodical in which he sought to avoid ideological debate by using history as a source for renewal of Mennonite identity. In the first issue of this periodical, which would become the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Bender addressed the opening dedication to the youth of the Mennonite Church.

His words ring true for the youth of 1926 as they do to the youth of any generation.

*"The Golden Age of the Mennonite Church is not past, it is just ahead.*

*Youth of the Mennonite Church, the church of tomorrow! The heritage is yours, the organization is yours, the talent is yours, the problems are yours, the future is yours. Get the vision, follow the gleam, bend your back to the burden, consecrate yourselves to the task. You are needed, you are wanted, you are able. May God grant the will."*

Amen.

## Response

Ask two members of the congregation to offer a response to the readings on the Young People's Conference. Choose one younger person and one older person. The responders can speak directly to what they heard from the Y.P.C. story or use the Y.P.C. story as starting point from which to share from their own experience. If the responders are willing to read the full essay on the Y.P.C. in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, they will be able to offer a more nuanced and thoughtful response than they would if they only read the simplified story offered in this resource.

Responders might consider the following questions:

- Who did you identify with in the story of the Y.P.C. movement?
- In what ways did you see a young generation struggling to find its voice in the church?
- Where might the young have benefited from the experience of the old and where might the old have benefited from the vision of the young?
- What dynamics present in the story of Y.P.C. could be true of any generation as it comes into maturity?
- How does the Y.P.C. story connect with your own experiences of vision, change and conflict as a younger/older person in the church?
- How do you think about the Y.P.C. in light of the scripture texts and sermon for today?

## Confession

*Adapted from Joel 2 and Hymanal: A Worship Book, #698*

Leader:

"Even now," declares the LORD,  
"return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting and weeping and mourning."

Rend your heart

and not your garments.

Return to the LORD your God,

for he is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and abounding in love,

**People:**

Forgive me my sins, O Lord.

Forgive me the sins of my youth

and the sins of my age,

the sins of my soul

and the sins of my body

my secret and my whispering sins,

the sins I have done to please myself

and the sins I have done to please others.  
Forgive them, Lord;  
forgive them all in your great goodness,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**Leader:**

In response to his people the Lord said:  
And afterward,  
    I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
    your old men will dream dreams,  
    your young men will see visions.  
Even on my servants, both men and women,  
    I will pour out my Spirit in those days.  
And everyone who calls  
    on the name of the LORD will be saved.  
Amen.

## Benediction

*Adapted from Psalm 144.*

May our sons in their youth  
    be like plants full grown,  
our daughters like corner pillars,  
    cut for the building of a palace.  
May we grow together, young and old  
    in wisdom, truth and grace.  
Amen.

*Heritage Sunday resources written by Anna Showalter. Resources provided by the Mennonite Church USA Archives.*

## Archives Locations

**Newcomer Center, Goshen College**

1700 S. Main St.  
Goshen, IN 46526

**Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College**

300 East 27th St.  
North Newton, KS 67117-1716

History@MennoniteUSA.org

## Background Reading

Yoder, Bob. *A History of Mennonite Youth Ministry, 1885-2005*. 2013.

Showalter, Anna.

<http://resources.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/ShowalterMHB.pdf> "The rise and fall of the Young People's Conference, 1918-1923." 1919-1923: the legacy of a (failed?) vision." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 2 (April 1, 2011): 181-217.