

MINUTES

**Mennonite Church USA
Delegate Assembly
Orlando, Florida
July 6 & 8, 2017**

Thursday, July 6

1. Opening

Moderator Patricia Shelly called the opening delegate session to order, welcoming all to today's meeting. She recalled Jeremiah 29, in which God's counsel and promise are offered to God's people in exile. God said He knew the plans He had for the people, giving them a future and a hope. These words are equally true for Mennonite Church USA today. We are here to seek the Spirit's presence, revealing God's will for the church.

2. Introduction of guests and participants

Conference leadership and guests present were introduced and/or recognized:

Moderator-elect: David Boshart

Anti-Racism Monitoring Team: Samantha Lioi, David Hockman Wert, Sandra Vielman,
Joanne Gallardo

Recording Secretary: Bill Zuercher

Executive Director: Ervin Stutzman

Executive Assistant: Shelley Buller

Parliamentarians: Ed Diller, Phil Bailey

Listening Committee: Nisha Springer, Tina Begay, Charlotte Hardt, Stephen Kriss, Terry Zehr.

Resolutions Committee: Samuel Voth Schrag, Diane Zaerr Brenneman, Linda Dibble,
Kristin Jackson, Byron Pellecer

First time delegates

Conference ministers

CEOs of churchwide agencies:

Stanley Green, Mennonite Mission Network

Rick Stiffney, Mennonite Health Services Alliance

Carlos Romero, Mennonite Education Agency

Hannah Heinzekehr, The Mennonite

Russ Eanes, Menno Media

Ken Hochstetler, Everence

International guests:

Tanzania : Bishop Joseph Mutorela, Pastor John Wambura, Bishop Amos Joseph Muhagachi, Bishop Chris Kateti

Nigeria: Bishop Vicator UmohAbasi

South Africa: Baptist pastor Oscar Siwali

Spain: Nohemy Ruth Garcia

South Korea: Kyong-Jung Kim

Church of the Brethren: Samuel Sarpiya, Moderator; Chris Douglas, Conference Director; David Steele, General Secretary

Following the personal introductions, Ervin read excerpts from a letter sent by Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, expressing a hope for God's blessing on the assembly.

3. Table introductions

Table groups were instructed to take time for introductions as the first formal effort to get acquainted.

4. Affirmation of group covenant

Table groups were instructed to read the group covenant aloud at each table, giving verbal expression of their affirmation.

5. Adoption of minutes from Kansas City 2015

The minutes had been distributed and posted on the website.

Action 1 **M/s/c that the minutes be approved as the official record of the 2015 assembly.** Nathan Luitjens/Kristen Jackson

6. Adoption of special rules and agenda for this meeting

Patricia referred to the written reports on behalf of the Executive Board and staff as well as churchwide agencies, commending them as an important record of significant actions and discussions during the past biennium.

She drew attention to the rules that govern the procedures for discussion and actions, which were read aloud by David Boshart. Delegates from a variety of appointment bodies were recognized.

Action 2 **M/s/c that the agenda and special rules be adopted.** Katherine Franz Swinger/Michael Danner

7. Nominations Ballot

Members of the Leadership Discernment Committee presented the slate of nominees for the next biennium. Prior to voting, Heidi Regier Kreider offered a prayer for discernment and blessing.

The ballot was affirmed by a large margin, electing all of those whose names appeared on the ballot.

8. Status of Executive Director

Ervin Stutzman has announced his plans to retire from his position in 2018. The Executive Board has appointed a Search Committee. Joy Sutter, moderator-elect designate, reported that the committee has met twice already during the convention, beginning the process that will include wide participation across the church in an effort to do the best and most complete task of discernment of qualified candidates.

Members of the Search Committee are Joy Sutter, chair; Joyce Kusuma, Sandra Martinez, Phil Rich, Samuel Voth Schrag, Zenobia Sowell-Bianchi, and Dick Thomas.

9. Resolution on Israel/Palestine

This resolution is a significant revision of the one that was presented to the 2015 assembly in Kansas City, at which time the delegates acted to table the resolution for modifications and reintroduction at the 2017 assembly.

André Gingerich Stoner gave a detailed introduction to the process of revision and highlighted the significant changes that have been made. He was joined by 18 others on the stage who were directly involved in the process throughout. Grace, mercy, truth and justice are the values that are represented in the resolution, bathed in humility and recognition of the need for concrete steps to address the wrongs to both Palestinians and Israelis.

There was a three-member writing group, and a 10-member reference group, that have been at work during the past two years. Last December a draft was published, to which some 80 comments were made and considered in subsequent rewriting. An interesting phenomenon is that this process has brought persons in face-to-face conversation who had never before been personally engaged.

Mark Regier spoke on behalf of the reference group, himself an employee of Everence which as an organization supports the resolution. Cyneatha Millsaps spoke as a participant in one of the Come and See Learning Tours to Israel/Palestine. Tom Harder spoke as chair of the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), commending the specific action steps included that can help address some of the suffering that has been inflicted on the Palestinians.

Jonathan Brenneman reflected on his work in a Mennonite Voluntary Service assignment, specifically charged with giving guidance to the work on the resolution that has occupied his full time during the past year. He introduced Rabbi Brant Rosen, Jewish member of the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) Rabbinical Council, and Alex Awad, missionary with the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church and a pastor of a church in East Jerusalem.

Alex Awad expressed his thanks for this journey since Kansas City, having visited many churches, institutions and organizations in the past two years and experiencing a wide variety of Mennonite hospitality. He spoke on behalf of a number of persons affected by the current conflict:

- A woman from the West Bank, specifically Bethlehem, where much land has been confiscated, and where thousands of Palestinians have been crowded into refugee camps.
- A boy from Gaza, where the situation is desperate and heading toward becoming uninhabitable.
- A woman in Jerusalem where there is a danger of important Islamic shrines being destroyed.

He noted the drastic decline in the Christian presence in the Holy Land which could result in its complete demise. He invited Mennonite missionaries to Israel/Palestine to join him at the podium and urge a positive vote. Finally, Alex invoked the words of Jesus who said that He is present wherever two or three are gathered together. All people—Jews, Palestinians and Christians—are suffering on the Jericho Road.

Rabbi Brant Rosen expressed his pleasure in being invited to the assembly, representing the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council—a fast growing group across the country. It is the largest Palestinian Solidarity group of Jews in the U.S., largely including the presence and involvement of young persons. He encouraged delegates to vote for the resolution based on their own consciences, not because of his appeal. Rabbi Rosen read a statement from the JVP, endorsing the intent and content of the resolution, and expressing support for its adoption.

Table groups were instructed to spend time in discussing the resolution, guided by the following questions:

- Does the resolution name in helpful ways how we as Mennonites, Christians and US Americans have participated in harms against Palestinians and against Jews?
- Does the resolution offer concrete, substantive, realistic next steps for addressing these harms?
- What one or two things in the resolution could you imagine putting into practice in your congregation or area conference?

Open mic comments in favor:

- As the son of a Palestinian refugee, he believes it is past time to follow in the footsteps of peacemakers and support those who have been so displaced.
- Originally a Christian Zionist which he now repudiates, he became involved in protesting South African apartheid and now sees similarities in Israel/Palestine.
- The peace witness brought her back to the Mennonite Church. This resolution is a way to voice a Christian peace message as a body.
- There is reportedly a new Israeli law that bars entry into the country by those known to have engaged in protests.
- While not being so sure this will really make a difference to people in Palestine, its major contribution is how it will form MC USA now and in the future— making us intentional about not being anti-Semitic and caring for the Palestinians
- As a participant on a Come and See learning tour last year, she was able to see firsthand the effects of militarism and fear, and the oppression and occupation. This is a faithful response to the conflict in that region, calling us to a just peace, to reach out to Jewish and Palestinian communities.
- In the fall of 2000, she was in Bethlehem during the second Intifada, with the sounds of bombs bursting all around--a terrifying experience. This was happening with our tax dollars, which is a violation of Jesus' call to us to be faithful with our dollars.
- The resolution two years ago felt too simplistic which could not be supported. Now it feels as if thorough work has been done, balancing concerns about both parties, reflecting the spirit of Christ in a humble call for justice, along with calling on us to speak to our government.
- She has been involved with Christian/Jewish Allies, working for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine, primarily through education about the situation in Palestine. We should ask officials to end funding for this injustice. This resolution calls for Christians and Jews to work together through mutual relationships.
- She had the opportunity to meet Rabbi Rosen and a Palestinian Christian. As a participant on one of the learning tours, she was heartbroken, but felt convicted to

learn so much more and not be overwhelmed and then do nothing out of a sense of paralysis. It is important to invest in doing everything we can.

- There is a request that the church will make available resources that point to more specific products that we might avoid in the boycott effort. MennoPIN does have that on its website. There is a similar call for resources that will help us act on the commitments included in the resolution.
- There is concern for family and friends on both sides of the wall, both Israeli and Palestinian. This resolution bespeaks an interconnectedness to the suffering on both sides.
- While this resolution focuses on injustices for Palestinians and Israelis, it is an appeal and call for justice to all people. Voting yes is a confession and commitment to work for and on behalf of bodies that are occupied here.
- With the recent Holocaust remembrance, we are reminded that both sides are damaged by this conflict, with the hope that this will promote change.
- This resolution has opened up space for us as Mennonites to engage in conversation with Muslims and Jews, as some have already done. This should heighten mutual respect.
- A prayer was received from the Sabeel community in Palestine, assuring MC USA of their prayers this week. In particular, they are praying that delegates will have courage to commit themselves.
- Some of our Step Up youth participants agreed that this is a good beginning, but we should continue to be aware that we are giving our word to take action.
- Mennonites need to be a voice for peace as a continuing activity. This is one way but not the only way.

Open mic comments against, or with reservations:

- This resolution presents a false equivalency between the suffering of the Jews and Palestinians. Anti-Semitism needs to be more nuanced.
- Why is there no statement about the right of Israel to exist? **Response:** There are places in the document that indicate how important that language is, specifically lines 12-13; 29, 31. The right of any state to exist is foreign language to Mennonites.
- The reference in line 88 to “end the occupation” is implicitly political and takes away the possibility of the Israeli government to hear our voice. We should find a different term.
- There are 150,000 Messianic Jews in Israel in 200 Messianic communities. That needs to be named in the resolution. Their cry needs to be included.
- It is a beautiful resolution, but it shifts language, talking about “Israelis,” then “Jewish people”. Are we going to recognize the generational trauma feeding into this occupation and conflict? **Response:** We tried to be clear when talking about Jewish people and Israeli government, in particular Footnote #4 on page 3.
- In regard to line 67, are we feeling as though the act of paying taxes is sin? **Response:** This is not spelled out, but it is a situation we have struggled with.
- There is an issue with wording regarding anti-Semitism. We are uncertain about the extent of anti-Semitism among Mennonites. Clarity is recommended on Line 110 because this will quickly hit the national and international news. **Response:** Footnote #7 indicates more research needs to be done.

- As a people, Mennonites understand issues related to the land. We may be missing an opportunity to form an identity with both Jewish and Palestinian people. We know what it is like to lose land and our culture to be undermined. The resolution would be stronger if we had identified land as being something in common with both.
- Mennonites suffer from short-term memory. We should consider how we still occupy the land of first Americans and yet we don't talk about it. Where are our statements?
- There is concern about the balance between social gospel and evangelism. Do we need to pass a resolution for everything we are sorry for?

Table groups were invited to submit written questions, comments or concerns to MC USA staff, for further awareness and attention by the Executive Board.

Following the discussion, a standing vote indicated overwhelming support for the resolution, with a few opposed and 2 abstentions.

Patricia gave a reminder that this is indeed only the beginning of our work, prayers and actions together which we will take seriously. Executive Board and staff will give immediate attention to the availability of resources for use back at home.

Byron Pellecer offered a prayer of blessing to conclude the work on the resolution.

Delegates participated in the FUTURE CHURCH SUMMIT.

Saturday, July 8

10. Recognition of Tanzanian delegation

Moderator Patricia Shelly reconvened the delegate session at the conclusion of the Future Church Summit.

She called on Ervin Stutzman to recognize the presence of the four men from Tanzania, who were introduced on Wednesday (see Minute #2). They have been praying for MC USA from home, and during their time at the assembly. They brought a message of greetings and blessing from their churches back home, confirming their commitment to continuing prayer. They concluded with a song in their native tongue, and a prayer of blessing.

11. Action on Future Church Summit

Patricia Shelly invited table group members to take a brief time to share their affirmations and concerns from the Future Church Summit process, prior to formal reception of the report and related action.

Samuel Voth Schrag presented a resolution on behalf of the Resolutions Committee. **“We, the delegates of Mennonite Church USA affirm the collective work of the Future Church Summit (FCS) participants and we receive the FCS Theme Team’s report as the direction of our national body. We commend this report to the Executive Board, our church-wide agencies, area conferences, and congregations as a guide for living into God’s calling for our church.”**

David Boshart reported that the material generated by the FCS will be placed on the MC USA website, offering it out to conferences and congregations for awareness and response. During the coming biennium, it is the intention that this will guide the agenda of the Executive Board, along with the related agencies and organizations. The report will be used to formulate church-wide priorities in our purposeful planning.

Prior to action on the resolution, time was allotted for brief comments:

- The language of setting a direction seems to differ from David Boshart's summary—a disconnect. There is an objection to an action to set a direction without testing the findings with sending bodies. [Multiple voices expressed similar sentiments.]
- The language of “federation of conferences” that appears in one of the Theme Team's reports is a very different direction which came suddenly. As a person who affirms diversity and inclusiveness but holds to the traditional view of marriage, he has not felt safe to express that view in the Summit discussions.
- While he affirms the process and efforts, it is too soon in the process to make this a direction. We need more time, including how we define some of the terms.
- In spite of our efforts, there is the sense that the people in the room are not fully representative of our church, lacking sufficient diversity. We are not including many youth in the process.
- We need to clarify our understanding of diversity. Ethnic and theological diversity cannot be mixed.
- While this is not acceptable as setting a direction, it can be used as a guide for living into God's church.
- The two-year hiatus regarding the Israeli/Palestine resolution served us well. Might we consider tabling action on this until 2019?
- The report will best serve us if we get the weight of the various comments. We are encouraged to be as transparent as possible in talking about the process and intention.
- The idea of a federation of area conferences, and replacing the Confession of Faith, need extensive discussion.
- The FCS participants who are not also delegates need to be heard.
- A young participant believes that there needs to be more concrete action as evidence that young voices are being heard. The results of the FCS feel wishy washy.
- As a young adult, this process feels like a good start to help young adults, but she admits she does not know what to take back to her church. She was encouraged by being here and felt welcomed.
- Another young participant would like the follow up to be more thought out, and to wait some time before taking action.
- Yet another young participant affirmed her sense of having been in a safe space, observing no move to throw anybody out.
- A final youth's voice confirmed that this experience was eye-opening for youth, enabling them to learn a lot.

Following the foregoing comments, the Resolutions Committee convened for further discussion of the questions and issues raised, returning with the following substitute resolution:

“We the delegates of Mennonite Church USA affirm the collective work of the Future Church Summit (FCS) participants and we receive the FCS Theme Team’s report. We commend this report to the Executive Board. We intend that this report be a dynamic document that is offered to the church to guide further discernment for living into God’s calling in agencies, conferences, constituency groups, and congregations. “

A vote of the delegates indicated overwhelming support for the resolution with some negative votes and abstentions. No actual count was called for.

Members of the prayer team offered a prayer on behalf of the church in this process and action.

12. Resolution of appreciation

The Resolutions Committee submitted the following resolution:

The Delegate Body of Mennonite Church USA gathered in Orlando in July of 2017 would like to thank:

- The Design Team of the Future Church Summit for helping us talk in new ways about our dreams for the church.
- The Theme team for collating thousands of responses in remarkably short periods of time.
- Katherine Barnes for her guidance
- The Step Up delegates who joined us and brought their energy and perspective.
- All the people who joined us for the Future Church Summit.
- The guests from churches all over the world who joined us, shared with us, and prayed for us.
- The moderator and moderator-elect, Patty Shelly and David Boshart, who have served our denomination this week.
- All the volunteers and staff of Mennonite Church USA who poured their heart into making this convention possible.
- The Southeast Mennonite Conference for your welcome and hospitality.
- and all the people of Orlando who have worked to host us here.

May God bless you all.

The resolution was affirmed with resounding applause.

13. Report from Anti-Racism Team

Members of the Anti-Racism Team gave a verbal report of their observations and the comments they received. A detailed report will be submitted to the Executive Board.

14. Report from Listening Committee

Members of the Listening Committee gave a verbal report of their observations and the comments they received.

15. Transfer of authority from Patricia Shelly to David Boshart

Patricia gave a concluding message following her time, first as an Executive Board member and ultimately as the moderator. She expressed appreciation for the opportunity, which has been a

labor of love, giving thanks to God for the opportunities she has had to learn and to serve. She pledged her fervent prayers for her successors in leadership for the denomination.

Ervin Stutzman presented a wooden platter, which he crafted, as a gift for her dedicated service to the church.

Patricia invited David Boshart to the podium, in acknowledgment of his assuming the role of moderator. David affirmed his love for the church and for all its members. He challenged us to keep our hearts secure in God's love. He acknowledged the support of his wife and others as he moves into this leadership role. He expressed appreciation to Patricia for her effective work as a leader and colleague, and he recognized Joy Sutter as the incoming moderator-elect. She was presented with a prayer shawl, knitted by Bonnie Stutzman, with words of encouragement to wear it often. Tim Detweiler, Conference Minister for Central Plains Mennonite Conference, offered a prayer of blessing and benediction.

16. Acknowledgment and conclusion

David noted that this will be Ervin Stutzman's final assembly as Executive Director, since he will be retiring at the end of April 2018. Ervin's service to the church was marked with a standing ovation.

Action 3 **M/s/c that the meeting be adjourned.** Dorothy Jean Weaver/Dylan Keller

Bill Zuercher
Recorder