

# Menno-Life



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## Mennonite Church USA Convention 2019: Come As You Are

By Gerald J. Mast

The spiritual thrust of the Mennonite Church USA convention held in Kansas City from July 2-6 was a persistent call to allow the Holy Spirit to do her reconciling and transforming work among us, rather than to insist on polity clarity or an orderly consensus. “Our documents will not save us,” executive director Glen Guyton said, during the final sermon on Saturday. That sermon began with Guyton performing the grunge rock anthem from Nirvana: *Come as You Are*, during which time Carrie turned to me and said: “This is not the same Mennonite Church.” Indeed, it is not.

Each delegate session began with an intensive Bible study led by Tom Yoder-Neufeld focused on the book of Ephesians. The central message of this scholarly and carefully nuanced Bible study was that the church in which the Holy Spirit is moving is lively and complex and full of seemingly intractable problems. These are problems that the writer of Ephesians addresses by naming the unity of the Spirit as a chain that holds us together, even when we are not inclined to walk together: sort of like a peace chain gang. We learned to say: “The church is a mess, thanks to God. The church is a mess, thanks be to God.”

The delegates heard and discussed numerous reports from church agencies and congregations carrying out the church’s mission, including an update on work associated with the Israel/Palestine resolution adopted during our last convention in Orlando, a report from MennoMedia on the shape of the new hymnal *Voices Together* that will be released next year, and ongoing discussion of the biblical ground and process connected with the Journey Forward vision for the denomination.

FMC senior high youth attending convention included (from left) Grace Paquin, Jacob Biesecker-Mast, Ana Neufeld Weaver, Jacob Suter, Patrick Estell, Sophia Gott, and Ellie Nickel.



We approved next steps in the merger of two Mennonite publications—*The Mennonite* and *Mennonite World Review*—which will also include the introduction of a new denominational communication platform to appear in both digital and print form. This new configuration of Mennonite content sources should make it clearer which stories are public relations tools that display the perspective of official denominational leadership and agencies and which stories are news and opinion coverage from a broader Mennonite spectrum. The delegates also passed a resolution to allow youth delegates to be voting members of future assemblies.

During the convention, a group of delegates created a draft of a resolution condemning the abuse of migrant children in the U.S. immigration system and calling for an end to the separation of families. The draft was revised with the assistance of the resolutions committee and brought to the delegate assembly for action on Saturday morning. It was approved by a nearly unanimous vote.

Pink Menno offered a persistent witness for the inclusion and well-being of LGBTQ people in our churches and denomination, continuing the tradition of hymn sings outside the delegate assembly and worship halls, collaborating with other peace and justice advocacy groups for an intersectional booth in the exhibit hall, offering numerous unofficial seminars and events at the Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral across from the convention center, and hosting a party celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pink Menno on Thursday evening.

Each day the convention offered numerous seminars on a variety of topics from biblical studies, to peace and justice advocacy, to addressing sexual abuse in church institutions, to strengthening relationships in the church, to finding words of blessing amidst political and personal division. Our youth were applauded for attending a seminar that offered an intense and thorough biblical exegesis of the practice of forbearance.

For the first time in many decades the youth and adults joined together for every convention worship service. These joint worship services included a broad range of worship music from rousing praise and worship songs to a cappella hymns. The worship leaders, musicians, and preachers reflected the cultural, ethnic, and social diversity of the denomination, yet all worked creatively and competently to explore and apply the central biblical text for the convention: John 20:19-23. This text tells the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples following the resurrection while they were locked in a house together in fear and anxiety.

When Jesus appears, he shows the disciples his hands and side, says “Peace be with you,” breathes on them, invites them to receive the Holy Spirit, and sends them out, telling them that any sins they forgive will be forgiven.

Among the powerful and challenging sermons we heard addressing this story of calling and sending was Meghan Good’s passionate call to allow the breath of God to empower and enliven our discipleship, just like God’s breath brought to life the dead and dry bones in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision. We also heard Leonard Dow urgently remind us of how “suddenly” the world can change: whether it is Jesus showing up amidst a fearful gathering, a bright light striking Saul down on the road to Damascus, or an angel host greeting shepherds on a dark night with a song of peace and good will to all people.

My own experience is that “suddenly” after thirty years of arguing, merging, dividing, and lamenting, Mennonite Church USA is a newly transformed community of Christ. In his closing sermon, Glen Guyton displayed this newness in his words, his actions, in his very body, with an inspiring call to “come as you are,” to come disarmed, to invite all who will come to the table of God. He passed out cake to a diverse group on the stage, got down on his knees and washed their feet with a spray bottle, and urged us all to do the work of inviting and serving while letting God worry about transforming. “That’s the message I want us to send back as Mennonite Church USA, that we are one,” he said. “None of us is too good to get down on our knees and wash each other’s feet—no matter how they identify themselves, how big their bank account is, or their physical limitations—we are all children of God.”

First Mennonite Church sent four delegates to the convention: Theda Good, Gerald Mast, Amber Shelly, and Rhonda Winstead. Youth sponsors for the convention were Carrie Mast and Walt Paquin, who supported

seven youth group members from FMC: Jacob Biesecker-Mast, Patrick Estell, Sophia Gott, Ellie Nickel, Grace Paquin, Ana Neufeld Weaver, and Jacob Suter.

Other First Mennonite Church members attending were Phil Blount, who represented Mutual Aid Exchange (MAX) and helped lead a seminar on making churches safe spaces; Melissa Friesen, who gave a workshop on using theatre to promote social justice; Brent Schroeder and Lawrence Matthews, who attended on behalf of Bluffton University; Louise Matthews, who brought materials from the Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center and volunteered with the children's convention; Doug Luginbill, who represented Central District Conference; Seth Andreas, who attended the youth convention with the Grace Mennonite youth group; Jorian Mast, who attended the children's convention; Paula Luginbill, and Jim and Karen Klassen Harder. In addition to being a delegate, Gerald Mast presented a seminar on speaking words of blessing in a culture of contempt.

## **CDC annual assembly report**

First Mennonite Church has had a long and warm relationship with Central District Conference, not always the largest congregation, but a solid part of this conference helping to lead and shape the conference over the years.

Each year we gather as a community of church representatives to worship, dream, and do the business of the conference. We are honored that the Conference Minister, Doug Luginbill, is a member here at First Mennonite, along with his wife Paula. Ray Person serves on the Ministerial Committee, and Carrie Mast concluded her six years on the board as secretary.

The theme this year, "Come walk with us ... to God knows where" served us well as we sang songs and listened to speakers speak of God's faithfulness when life takes us in directions for which we did not plan or an opportunity arises in which we did not expect. This theme carries us as individuals, as congregations, and the conference into the days ahead. God, the divine force of love and light in our lives will go with us, ahead of us, and behind us, not that we will be protected from all harm or injury, but with us in life empowering, faith building, and a compassionate companion for the journey.

Ray Person in his role with the Ministerial Committee reflected on the lives of three credentialed leaders who have died since our last meeting. Two of them, Alice Ruth Ramseyer and Burton Yost, belonged to First Mennonite Church. Howard Habegger was the third, who served as a pastor in places such as Bogota, Colombia and Silverwood Mennonite. We celebrate their lives and their ministry of sharing God's love to others.

Justin Neufeld Weaver was our young adult representative. His reflections include the importance of getting to know the other congregations in our conference through playing disc golf, table conversations and worship. He was particularly impressed with the congregation who has found a way to welcome those who are former inmates. He encourages other young adults to have this experience and learn how other congregations are impacting the world.

The importance of our relationship to the conference cannot be overstated. We are no longer a regional conference as we stretch from St. Paul Minnesota to Sarasota Florida. This does not seem to hinder our ability to build significant relationships through video conferencing meetings and the various ways we stay connected and build bridges between our congregations.

I have a fond connection to the pastors at Covenant Mennonite Fellowship in Sarasota, FL. They were the conference ministers in Mountain States Conference who ordained me. The connections continue to grow the more we meet and share what God is doing in our midst.

*~ Pastor Theda Good on behalf of all our delegates - Carrie Mast, Daryl Nester, Gerald Mast, Justin Neufeld Weaver, Lori Nester, and Ray Person*

## Getting to know...

### Linda Falk Suter

By Joanne Niswander

Linda Falk Suter has been a part of Bluffton and First Mennonite Church for so many years that we might have forgotten that she was originally from Canada. But Canada is where she was born and lived all her growing-up years.

Linda's parents, Wilhelm and Katherine Falk, with two young children and a new-born, fled anarchy in the Ukraine following WWI and the Revolution. With support of others who had gone before them, a loan for travel from the Canadian Pacific Railroad, and a Canadian government sympathetic to these Mennonite refugees, they settled in a rented two-room house on a piece of rolling, dry, prairie seven and one-half miles north of Herbert, Saskatchewan.

And so it was that Linda and her twin sister first saw the light of day on a farm in Canada, as the fifth and sixth of seven children in the Falk family. Although Linda's parents had not been farmers during their years in Russia, nor was that way of living ever a part of their early expectations, necessity dictated that this small house and plot of land become their home. They eventually managed to own and expand the property so that, yet today, it remains an important "destination" for Linda's family - one which she has enthusiastically shared with her children and grandchildren - if only during a few special vacation days at a time.

Even though Linda's father may have lived the rest of his life as a farmer, he saw to it that each of his seven children received a good education, as well as being led to another profession. As a result, from the Falk family came a librarian, an accountant, an attorney, an engineer, a teacher, a nurse and an oncologist. "I admired my father a great deal," Linda says with a smile.



A nearby one-room school provided for Linda's first 10 years of "formal" schooling. Since the first language for Linda and her siblings was German, they each started to school with rudimentary writing skills in German - but no facility in English.

During this time, when Linda was 12 years old, her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, so Linda learned early on that life is not without set-backs. But school was still a priority in the family. For completion of public schooling, Linda and her twin sister shared a rented room in Herbert, returning home for weekends and church - as weather and the road allowed.

Linda attended Moose Jaw Saskatchewan Teacher's College for a year and then taught elementary school for two years at Rhineland, Saskatchewan before taking a year and a half of "Bible College" in Winnipeg. Completion of Bible College was cut short in order for Linda to help care for her mother at home. So, for the next four years she taught grades four through six at Main Center, a small community school near Herbert.

Eventually Linda moved to the far western province of British Columbia in order to teach for four years at Sharon Mennonite Collegiate, a junior/senior high school located in Yarrow, BC. During summers between school sessions, Linda had managed to accumulate the equivalent of two years of university credits. She left Yarrow finally for The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where she completed both her undergraduate work and a master's degree in 1967.

So equipped, Linda became intrigued with various opportunities to teach in one of the small Mennonite colleges in the United States. After some confusion resulting from a phone call from the dean of - was it Bethel? - or Bluffton? - she sent her credentials to Bluffton. Although Bluffton had NOT been the requesting school, the administration was pleased enough to invite her to join the English department. (Providence takes advantage of chaos). This, of course, meant beginning more graduate work and a PhD program at the University of Wisconsin.

In the meantime, Bob Suter came into the picture. He was a colleague of Linda's at Bluffton College - a professor in the science department. Bob's first wife, Nancy Heiks, had died immediately after their second child, Peter, was born in September of 1971. He was left with two very young children. Late the next spring, Bob called and asked Linda to go out for dinner and a movie ("but we'll have to use your car because my VW 'Bug' is not reliable!") Linda said that they were having such a good time over dinner that they were an hour late for the movie.

The academic year '71-'72 was just a few weeks from conclusion, barely enough time for Bob and Linda to enjoy a few short conversations over coffee. Then Linda was off to South America, directing a ten-week work-study program in Columbia, with 20 Bluffton students. Soon letters began to flow from Bluffton to Bogota and back to Bluffton - some 40 in all.

Linda and Bob were married during Christmas break of 1972. So Linda inherited a loving husband plus two young children: Peter one, and Beth four. Today, Linda nods with a big smile attesting to the fact that "it has been a very good marriage."

In 1976, Linda was asked to be Assistant Dean and Registrar at Bluffton. She was pleased at the offer, but was reluctant to give up teaching completely. So she said she would accept that position, " - if I can still teach one course." Permission granted. Linda retired from that position in 1999.

But, of course, retirement did not mean doing nothing. Linda's next ten years were devoted to the kitchen at "Common Grounds," a coffee shop and lunch room created by son Peter and his wife Kim. In the morning, Linda could be found in the shop's tiny kitchen cooking up some wonderful and varied soups-of-the-day like borscht, chicken noodle, and old fashioned vegetable.

And then, there are the grandchildren who are now a large part of Linda and Bob's lives. Beth and Ray's son Andrew, who has been a well-loved (and loving) Down's Syndrome grandchild, is a Bluffton High School graduate this spring, although he will continue his education here at Bluffton until he is 21. Peter and Kim's three children (Jacob, Elam and Makayla) are very active teenagers, making their mark at school and church. You can see the love in Linda's eyes as she speaks of them. One more way of keeping Linda and Bob young at heart.

In the meantime, Linda and Bob moved into town, after living in the country along Riley Creek on Bixel Road for almost 40 years. The move to Bluffton required almost a year because it involved a total renovation of a 1920 Sears "kit house" on Grove Street. The home continues to fit their retirement life-style and is within walking distance of the church, the university, and downtown Bluffton.

So what is Linda up to now? Well, she exercises in the Maple Crest pool regularly, enjoys meeting with good friends over lunch, is still an avid reader, belongs to a book group, continues to be very much interested in the world around Bluffton as well as far beyond, and is content to sit alone in church while Bob sees that everything goes well with the camera that records the worship service.

After chatting about her full life, what does Linda have to say to sum it all up? She reverts to the language that has never been completely forgotten. "Lebens fähigkeit!!" (I've enjoyed every aspect!)

We have enjoyed knowing you, too, Linda. Thank you for bringing your sunshine to Bluffton!

## Workshop on late-life living in community begins August 24

A three-session workshop on “Meaningful Presence: Support for Late Life Reorientation” will be offered at 1:30 p.m. on August 24, 31 and September 7 in the Community Room at Maple Crest. Jeff Boehr developed the workshop as part of his MA in Christian Formation program at AMBS.

According to Jeff, the workshop is “focused on noticing who we are and forming community in relationship with each other and with God. We will explore our path of formation and creative responses to what we notice. We will also explore creative possibilities for ongoing formation and meaning making with each other and God, directed toward living the last years of life.”

The three-session series is designed for those with some life experience and a desire to face the questions of late-life living in community. The series of sessions is limited to 10 persons. Additional workshops will be scheduled as needed for those interested.

Cost per person for the workshop is \$15. A sign-up sheet and brochures are located on a table outside the church office.

For questions or more information contact Jeff Boehr at 419.358.9150.



Games included eating chocolate pudding with no hands. At left, Evan Blount gestures at Kaleigh Coffman. Below, Glen Buller (plaid shirt) takes a breather before polishing off his pudding.



## Food, fun and fellowship at annual church picnic

The annual church picnic was held June 30 at the Bluffton Village Park. Despite the uncomfortably hot weather, attendance was great and the food was excellent! Thanks to Ann Kingsley for organizing the games which were enjoyed by many. Thanks to all who attended! ~ Nurture Commission

## Games, ice cream, campfire, ice cream, art and music at the Schumacher's

Thanks to JP and Tim Schumacher for extending their hospitality through three outdoor events at their home this summer. The June event featured art projects such as painting a wooden birdhouse and making a birdfeeder from an ice cream cone, peanut butter, and birdseed, and eating soda and ice cream floats.

The July event included games such as hula hoops, soccer and hopscotch, and homemade ice cream was served.

You've all got one more opportunity to join in the fun! On August 8, the final event will involve making musical instruments and making music, singing around the campfire, and eating popcorn. Musical Instruments begins at 6:30 p.m. at the Schumachers' home, 181 Riley St.



Above, Micah and Laura Hartzler paint a birdhouse. Above right, Fran Core and Steve Harnish chat while eating ice cream. Right, Jorian Mast and Ryan Blount play soccer with Levi Schumacher.

