

Jan. 14, 2010

**When we disagree
Mennonite Church USA statement, “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love,” offers guidance**

by Laurie Oswald Robinson for Mennonite Church USA

NEWTON, Kan. and ELKHART, Ind.—Lavonne van der Zwaag and her 16-year-old daughter, Anna, wore pink last July at the Mennonite Church USA Convention in Columbus, Ohio. They discovered just how complicated agreeing to disagree in love can be.

The mother wore a pink headband, her daughter a pink T-shirt to show solidarity with the Pink Mennos. The group, advocating for the inclusion of lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender people in Mennonite Church USA, provided a pink presence at the denomination’s convention in variance with the church’s theological stance on homosexuality.

van der Zwaag and her husband, members at Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church, raised their two daughters to live out their faith by discerning discipleship issues carefully and fairly.

“One day my daughter asked if she could get a pink T-shirt to wear at the convention,” says van der Zwaag. “We wanted to show support in silent, but visual, ways that signaled we wanted to dialogue if people asked questions.”

For the most part, the week didn’t evoke explicit negativity. Many people respectfully shared their differing biblical convictions and strong belief that Mennonite Church USA’s stance needed to be upheld. But a certain negative reaction did bring some pain. It was a lesson in how following Christ does not always mean you agree with those walking with you.

“On the way back from the fireworks, a fellow teenager asked my daughter what she was saying by wearing the pink shirt,” says van der Zwaag. “Anna told him she wanted to help promote the idea of all people being welcomed into the church, whether gay or straight. He then became verbally mean.”

After the convention, the family discussed what it means to be part of a church of members convicted differently.

“Since God is much bigger than anything we can understand in our minds, I believe we need to be open to sharing God’s love with one another even when we don’t find human consensus about God’s ways,” van der Zwaag says.

Walking together rather than parting paths

Finding consensus has not been easy for Mennonites, and they have often parted ways over differing convictions. In recent years those convictions have centered on wide-sweeping issues such as sexuality, the military and immigration as well as music, worship and leadership styles.

To help Mennonites deal with their divisive tendencies, the former General Conference Mennonite Church and the former Mennonite Church adopted the “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” statement in 1995 at its joint convention in Wichita, Kan. The two bodies merged in 2002 to become Mennonite Church USA.

Despite the fact that the document is theologically sound and clearly worded, it does not get much use, says Susan Mark Landis, denominational minister for peace and justice.

“Convention delegates use it, and some Mennonite schools use it in their restorative discipline, but aside from that, the document gets overlooked and underused,” Landis says. “That could be because Mennonites tend not to think they have conflict. Or if they do, they tend to think it is a bad thing.

“That perspective keeps us from seeing how much of a gift conflict can be,” Landis continues. “Conflict helps us get to know each other better and care for each other more honestly. Conflict can be the way we grow together—if we follow healthy guidelines in the midst of it.”

The “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” document provides guidelines for how to relate to others with differing convictions. They include: acknowledging conflict is a normal part of church life; affirming that as God walks with us in conflict, we can work through to growth; going directly in gentleness to those with whom we disagree; and suspending judgments, labeling and name calling.

Military issues as well as sexuality choices call for unity in diversity

Many of Mennonite Church USA’s 21 area conferences have needed to help congregations forge unity in diversity. For example, Virginia Mennonite Conference grapples intensely over differing convictions on military involvement.

“Our conference and congregational leaders have used the ‘Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love’ document a lot on the instinctive level, especially when it pertains to the military,” says Owen Burkholder, conference minister.

“All five U.S. military branches set up bases near our ports, and the military industrial complex surrounds some of our congregations. They have grappled with what it means to minister to their neighbors, particularly in war time when one or both of the spouses are shipped out. They have to deal with what it means to be missional in this context.”

In January 1996, Virginia Conference adopted a proposal that asked credentialed conference leaders to be committed to “Article 22. Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance” in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. The article calls for nonparticipation and for living nonviolently. Leaders were asked not to teach contrary to this article and to help those they serve to progressively move away from a militaristic viewpoint or involvement.

“The proposal works with what is called a centered set of guidelines—the direction of where

things are going—rather than specific thresholds or boundaries,” Burkholder says. “This enables congregations to help people walk the Jesus way and to take further steps on the journey without requiring them to arrive at a certain point, ‘or else.’”

Staying connected in disconnecting times

Burkholder believes the conference proposal and the guidelines found in “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” can help people with differing convictions to stay connected. But helping all parts of a diverse denomination to remain connected in disconnecting times is a challenge, says Lee Lever, director of denominational ministry for Mennonite Church USA.

“Our culture is permeated by polarization and militarization. National leaders around the globe default to violent might to override opposition,” he says. “Organizations and even churches like ours unconsciously pick up those signals, and we unconsciously follow the same paths of aggression when dealing with our disagreements.”

Lever believes that “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” is a good first step the church can build on more substantially to strengthen its unity in diversity. He believes this document may need to be further deepened and updated to make it more broadly useful.

“I consistently hear across the denomination that we need to give ourselves more space and time to talk together about substantial issues,” he says. “That’s especially true because new believers today often aren’t familiar with all our beliefs and our God-talk.

“The things we took for granted 30 years ago about having a similar framework are no longer the case,” Lever says. “We need to have space and guidelines for talking about God and theology and spirituality and sexuality and war and many other things. That is the only way we will become the missional church we are committed to being.”

Guidelines for those disagreeing

Accept conflict.

Affirm hope.

Commit to prayer.

Go to the other in the spirit of humility.

Be quick to listen.

Be slow to judge.

Be willing to negotiate.

Be steadfast in love.

Be open to mediation.

Trust the community.

Be the Body of Christ.

-- excerpt from “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love: Commitments for Mennonites in Times of Disagreement,” Mennonite Church USA, 1995