

Mennonite Church USA News Releases
January 27, 2010

1. Mennonite Church USA moderator responds to concern of Dutch Mennonites
2. Mennonite Men announces appointment of new coordinator
3. Schmidt completes 27 years at Mennonite Church USA Newton offices
4. Music, worship leaders find retreat, renewal at Laurelville Center
5. "Dark Night" leads to stronger faith
6. Getting to know Menno

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Mennonite Church USA moderator responds to concern of Dutch Mennonites

ELKHART, Ind. and NEWTON, Kan. - Leaders of the Dutch Mennonite Church sent a letter to Mennonite Church USA in December, expressing their concern about President Barack Obama's call for the U.S. military's escalation of troops in Afghanistan.

Signed by Otto P. Bleker and Alle G. Hoekema of Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit Nederland, the letter acknowledged the pressure their own country is feeling to continue its military presence there.

"We send you this letter to share with you our deep and sincere concern about this decision," the Dutch leaders wrote. "We trust you will continue to make public the peace of Christ in your society. We feel convinced that many of you deplore the useless and dangerous continuation as much as we do and believe that Christ shows different ways of ending conflict."

In response, Mennonite Church USA moderator Ed Diller of Fort Thomas, Ky., sent a letter of appreciation for their concern.

"Along with you, Mennonite Church USA is deeply concerned about military build-up in Afghanistan," was part of Diller's response. He included resources Mennonite Church USA had drawn together for use by conferences and congregations about the U.S. military presence there.

With Diller's letter was a copy of a peace ad Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership staff made available to congregations and conferences to place in their local newspapers.

Originated by the Albuquerque (N.M.) Mennonite Church, the ad has also been used by other churches, including some Virginia Mennonite Conference congregations in the Harrisonburg area who placed an ad in their local newspaper.

“We ask you to pray for Mennonite Church USA leaders and members as we respond to our country’s militaristic impulses,” Diller wrote. “Pray that we may be bold in proclaiming Christ as the Prince of Peace.”

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Mennonite Men announces appointment of new coordinator

By Marvin Baergen, Mennonite Men Executive Committee, Calgary, Alberta

NEWTON, Kan. and WINNIPEG, Man.--Mennonite Men is pleased to announce the appointment of Don A. Yoder, Harrisonburg, Va., as the new coordinator of Mennonite Men. Yoder will begin June 1.

Yoder joins the organization from Eastern Mennonite University where he has served as director of seminary and graduate admissions since 1995 and director of seminary vocational services since 2008.

Yoder’s entire working career has been in service of the Mennonite Church in roles varying from an assignment with Eastern Mennonite Missions in Kenya, to youth ministry, pastoral ministry and spiritual formation.

“Don’s passion for Christian formation, particularly in the area of men’s ministry, and his width of experience in the work of the church will serve him well as he takes on this new role,” says Mennonite Men moderator Arlen Godshall of Phoenix, Ariz.

Yoder and his wife, Em, are the parents of two adult children.

Yoder succeeds Jim Gingerich, who has been the coordinator for Mennonite Men since 1998 and plans to retire.

“Jim has guided the program through a period of very significant growth in terms of finances, public awareness and expansion of men’s study resources,” Godshall says. “The Mennonite Men Board extends our most heartfelt appreciation for Jim’s selfless service over more than a dozen years.”

The Mennonite Men organization is a jointly owned partnership of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. It resources men’s groups in local congregations and area conferences and sponsors the JoinHands Mennonite Church Building Program.in Constituency

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Schmidt completes 27 years at Mennonite Church USA Newton offices  
By June Krehbiel

NEWTON, Kan.—When Doris Schmidt logged off her computer Dec. 31 at Mennonite Church USA, she concluded 21 consecutive and 27 total years of work at 722 North Main in Newton, Kan. For most of 50 years she filled office positions at the denominational offices and at other places in Newton and North Newton, welcoming some changes and adjusting to others in office technology.

After high school at Freeman (S.D.) Academy and one year at Freeman Junior College, she started her career in her hometown, typing church bulletins in the secretarial bureau at the college. Knowing her abilities, her pastor at Hutterthal Mennonite Church encouraged her to interview with Walter Unrau for secretarial work at the General Conference Mennonite Church offices in Newton.

The next week Schmidt got a letter offering her a job in Newton. But would her father, Jac. Mendel, Jr., let her leave home at age 18 and move 400 miles away, where she knew no one?

Schmidt is still surprised that her dad, a widower, encouraged her to take the job for the General Conference Mennonite Church Board of Education and Publication. He could have used her help on the farm.

But, for Schmidt, the new location gave her the opportunity to use her training as a secretary and, over the years, to work for various church-related offices, including three periods at the denominational offices. She worked from 1958 to 1960 as a secretary for Willard Claassen, who oversaw the Foundation Series Sunday school curriculum, and for Maynard Shelly, editor of *The Mennonite*.

“When the electricity went off, we pulled our typewriters over to the big windows and kept typing,” she says.

From 1977 to 1981 she was secretary for *The Mennonite* magazine and News Service office.

“I learned a lot about the church,” she says.

Her most recent appointment for the denomination began in 1988 as a secretary in the Women in Mission office. For nine years she edited the denomination’s *Handbook of Information*, and, from 1999 until the end of 2009, served as receptionist, finance assistant and associate editor for the Mennonite Church USA Directory.

“Doris provided exceptional service to the denomination in the role of receptionist for the churchwide toll-free number, and she added a cheerful presence at the front desk in the Newton office,” says Shelley Buller, supervisor for churchwide switchboard operations. “Her interest in

connecting with people and her vast knowledge from her many work experiences were true gifts to our church.”

Technology advancements since her earliest training in the 1950s required Schmidt to adapt. The manual typewriter and its multiple carbon copies changed to the computer. Rotary phones transformed to IP unified communications systems. Letters stuffed tediously into envelopes for mailings changed to e-mails sent speedily through the Internet. The print-only directory that she helped publish for a number of years transformed into an online directory.

Schmidt felt a connection not only with office staff, but with denominational folks she met on the phone, at meetings and conventions. She appreciated the way the work matched her abilities.

“I truly loved the work here,” she said. “I loved plain data entry and typing, and I know it’s weird, but I love to file too. I’ve done a lot of filing.”

Other places she worked in Newton were at Midland National Bank, Menno Travel Service and Bethel College. She also was secretary for historian Harley Stucky, who headed up activities for several centennials, including the 1974 Swiss Mennonite Centennial.

Schmidt and her husband, Virgil P. Schmidt, raised three children in the Newton community and were part of Faith Mennonite Church. When the children left home and especially after Virgil’s death in 2003, her work became her family. She appreciated her years at the denominational offices.

“I was always proud to say I worked at 722!” she says.

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Music, worship leaders find retreat, renewal at Laurelville Center
By Brian Paff

Mount Pleasant, Pa.—Pastors and worship leaders from the Mennonite Church in the United States and Canada gathered at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center for the Music and Worship Leaders’ Retreat Jan. 8-10.

A rich tradition since 1987, the retreat featured the presence of special guest Brian McLaren, a renowned pastor, writer and speaker who is a leader of the emergent church movement.

The weekend centered on the lectionary theme for the upcoming Lenten season: “Holding on and Letting Go.” Marlene Kropf, Mennonite Church USA minister of worship, encouraged attendees to understand the deeper implications of Lent. “Lent is about how we become lost,” she said during Friday evening’s opening session. “Grace reconnects us to our true selves.”

Kropf spoke of the importance of personal transformation during the season and the key role worship leaders can fill for their congregations. “We aren’t often explicitly theological here at

these Laurelville weekends; we prefer to do our theology implicitly—get it slant in poetry or singing, drama, rituals or visuals.”

Plenary sessions walked participants through some of the hymn selections and Scripture passages provided in *Leader*, a worship resource periodical for Anabaptist congregations. Under the guidance of Kropf, Eastern Mennonite University professor Ken Nafziger and worship resource specialist Marilyn Houser Hamm, participants observed new skills for worship leading.

“I was in awe of the people, the resources—the whole environment,” commented first-time attendee Ricky Schrag of Akron, Pa.

For many, the Music and Worship Leaders’ Retreat served as a much-needed reprieve. After a full Advent season that begins in November and carries over to Epiphany in January, pastors and worship leaders often find that they need to be filled again before Lent’s 40-day journey.

“I love the season of Advent,” remarked Mary Lehman Yoder, a pastor at Assembly Mennonite, Goshen, Ind., “but often near the end I need a break.” She has found solace at Laurelville over the past decade. “I realize how the retreat is a part of my inner rhythm.”

For others, the weekend represents an opportunity to engage in relevant dialogue with other leaders, ranging in topic from hymn selection and visual design to theological underpinnings in the context of worship.

Brian McLaren’s presence emphasized the latter. “He helped us to gather the rich diversity of insights within the group, allowing us to appreciate the fullness of Scripture passages for the Lenten season,” observed Derek Yoder of Plainfield, Ill.

Laurelville program director Angela Dietzel echoed Yoder’s appreciation for McLaren. “Brian McLaren’s participation in the weekend was a gift,” she said. “As the Mennonite Church discerns the future along with the larger Christian Church, I believe his words will reverberate in the minds of those present and be infused in emerging dialogue.”

McLaren pointed out that the worship leader’s role is to allow for the congregation to fully enter into God’s Word during worship and to listen to the Holy Spirit. “When dealing with Scripture,” he warned, “what we focus on often determines what we miss.”

Ted Swartz and Jeff Raught of Ted & Company TheaterWorks shared several sketches with the group and engaged participants in constructing their own readers’ theater out of a Lenten passage.

“Drama in worship allows people to think about the Bible in different ways,” said Lisa White, a Lancaster, Pa., resident who took part in the Sunday morning sketch that unfolded. “Ted walked us through the process of creating a story to share with others.” White left with renewed energy for sharing the gifts of dramatic interpretation with her church.

The next Music and Worship Leaders' Retreat is planned for January 7-9, 2011. Laurelville has added an additional program in the fall—Worship Arts Training—which offers participants hands-on workshops to strengthen worship-leading practice. Worship Arts Training is scheduled for Sept. 24-26, 2010.

For information, visit Laurelville.org or call 800-839-1021.

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“Dark Night” leads to stronger faith

Author Daniel Schrock describes how God uses dark times to change believers

By John Longhurst

WATERLOO, Ont. and SCOTTDALE, Pa. -- Have you ever felt abandoned by God? You say your prayers, go to church and read the Bible, but God seems so far away. What's going on?

What's happening, says Daniel Schrock, is the “dark night.”

“This is something that Christians rarely talk about, but which many experience,” says Schrock, author of *Dark Night: A Gift from God* (Herald Press).

It's not a punishment, he adds. “It's one of the ways God changes us so that we can more closely resemble the person God wants us to be.”

The idea of the dark night—often expressed as “the dark night of the soul”—was coined by John of the Cross, a 16th century poet and spiritual guide.

“The dark night is not the same as a lack of belief,” says Schrock, a spiritual director and a pastor at the Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship in Goshen, Ind. “And it isn't depression, either. It's a feeling of spiritual dryness—you can't pray or worship in a meaningful way, and the things that used to feed you spiritually don't do so anymore.

“You feel a growing desire to be with God, yet God feels far away.”

Schrock points out that the experience can happen to anyone, including those we regard as being among the most spiritual—people like Mother Teresa. Although she is widely acknowledged as one of the most saintly of Christians of the 20th century, she experienced the dark night for about 50 years.

“It was only after her death that we discovered from her private letters how deeply she struggled with a sense of abandonment by God,” he says.

Schrock's own experience of a dark night lasted for seven years, starting in 1998.

“God seemed far away, for no reason I could think of. I was active in the church, enjoying my job, worshipping and praying. Yet God never felt so distant.”

At first, Schrock was fearful, then resentful—why was God doing this? Later, he came to see it as part of God’s plan for his life.

“God used that time to change the way I prayed,” he says. “I became more contemplative. I listened more for God, instead of just talking to God. I learned to experience God at a deeper level.”

At the same time, he experienced a reorientation to the “attachments” in his life.

“I feel freer from some of the things that used to divert me away from God—activities, programs, hobbies, sports, music, TV. I still enjoy some of them, but they are no longer the centre of my life like they once were.”

Schrock says he came out of his dark night “with stronger faith. I can endure suffering and hardship a little better, and I have a deeper relationship with God, a stronger commitment to mission and a greater desire to serve others.”

He acknowledges that, when in the middle of it, a dark night “rarely feels like a gift.” But, he goes on to say, “just like the Exodus and the exile in Babylon were used by God to help the children of Israel become the people they were meant to be, my dark night helped me to become more of the kind of person God wants me to be.”

The Dark Night can be ordered from Mennonite Publishing Network by visiting [www.mpn.net/darknight](http://www.mpn.net/darknight)

Herald Press is the book imprint of Mennonite Publishing Network, the publishing ministry of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

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Getting to know Menno

The Fugitive helps people learn about a founder of the Mennonite faith
By John Longhurst

WATERLOO, Ont. and SCOTTDALE, Pa. -- If there is one thing Mennonites should know a lot about, it should be Menno Simons—the 16th century Anabaptist leader who gave their church its name.

Myron Augsburger worries that the opposite is true.

“I don’t think that many Mennonites today know as much as they should about him,” says the former president of Eastern Mennonite University and author of *The Fugitive*, a book from Herald Press that recounts the story of Menno’s conversion, life and service to the 16th century fledgling Anabaptist movement.

“They don’t really know the kind of person he was, the challenges he faced, the things he suffered for his beliefs or the deep quality of his faith in Jesus.”

If Mennonites today think of Menno Simons at all, says Augsburg, they think of him mostly as someone who stood for and promoted peace and justice.

“Menno certainly was committed to peacemaking and serving others,” he says, noting that he didn’t wear a sword—something unusual for a man during that time.

“But Menno was about much more than that. Most of his writings are about faith and the quality of life that begins with a new birth. He was very much concerned that people come to know Jesus—he didn’t just talk about ethics.”

Mennonites today also don’t know much about Menno the person, he says, noting that in addition to being a church leader, he was a husband and father of three children.

They also don’t know much about how he lived for years as a hunted man with a price on his head, fleeing from place to place in an effort to evade the police—or that, unlike so many of the other Anabaptist leaders of his time who were executed for their beliefs, he died of natural causes.

“It’s amazing that he escaped martyrdom and was able to die in his own bed,” says Augsburg. “This stands in sharp contrast to many of his contemporaries.”

Part of the reason why people don’t know these things, Augsburg says, is because most of the books about Menno have been written by academics for specialized audiences.

“Many good books have been written about Menno, and the story has been told in various ways,” he says. “But to my knowledge there has not been any serious English-language attempt to present the story in narrative form in a way that is true to Menno’s life and work. I wanted to use that form so that it would appeal to as wide an audience as possible.”

Now in its second printing, Augsburg’s account of Menno’s life has proved popular with readers of all ages.

“I’m pleased that so many people are finding it helpful,” says Augsburg. “It was my goal to help readers get into the shoes of Menno, and to try to see and understand the life he lived and the savior he loved and served.”

Augsburg knows that the picture he portrays is limited, due to lack of information about some

aspects of Menno's life. "A part of the book is a fictionalized account, but it is also a historical study," he says. "I have carefully researched and consulted with others on the story to get it as close to accurate as possible."

But, he adds, "It wasn't my goal to make a historical book. I wanted to present the drama that surrounded his life, and the service that he rendered to the church during his 25-year ministry. My goal was to bring him to life again for a new generation and to inspire them with his story just as he has inspired me."

And how has writing about Menno inspired Augsburgsburger?

"The more I learned about Menno, the more I was challenged to take my faith seriously and to seek a first-hand experience with the Lord and with the Bible," he says. "His story reminded me again and again that Christ is my foundation—just as it was for him."

To find out more about *The Fugitive*, visit www.mpn.net/fugitive.