

Bridgefolk  
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More than 115 peace-minded Catholics and sacramentally minded Mennonites came to Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana from July 26-29 for the sixth annual Bridgefolk Gathering.

Participants from as far as Nova Scotia and Hawaii listened to presentations on baptism and identity, took part in service projects and tours, and talked with each other for hours on the conference's theme, "Who do we think we are? Catholics and Mennonites growing together in Christ."

"This is the main event I look forward to each year," said Margaret Pfeil, an assistant professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame and a member of the St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker community in South Bend, Indiana.

Pfeil's sentiment was echoed repeatedly by attendees who find kindred spirits across denominational lines and who believe that Catholics and Mennonites have plenty to learn from each other.

The grassroots group seeks "to make Anabaptist-Mennonite practices of discipleship, peaceableness, and lay participation more accessible to Roman Catholics, and to bring the spiritual, liturgical, and sacramental practices of the Catholic tradition to Anabaptists."

Local Mennonite-Catholic groups have sprouted in a handful of locations, including Minneapolis/St. Paul, Winnipeg, Northern Indiana, Newton, Kansas; and Wooster, Ohio. Many have used "Called Together to be Peacemakers," an abridged version of the report by the International Mennonite-Catholic Ecumenical Dialogue that wrapped up in 2003, as a starting point for service activities or informal dialogues.

"The best way to start a group is just to start," said Gerald Schlabach, Bridgefolk's executive director. "There's no one model; the diversity among the groups indicates the wisdom and effectiveness of proceeding in friendship."

In his presentation on the connection between one's baptismal commitment and citizenship, André Gingerich Stoner, director of Interchurch Relations for Mennonite Church USA and pastor of missions at Kern Road Mennonite Church in South Bend, pointed out that through baptism, "our primary identity is with Christ, and we are linked to a global Body of Christ. What it means to really be linked to brothers and sisters across the globe is something we must consistently wrestle with," he said.

Thomas Finger, a Mennonite theologian from Evanston, Illinois said that in a time when governments refuse to talk with each other, "our efforts for dialogue are more crucial than ever." Finger mentioned that a Mennonite World Conference delegation would return to the Vatican in October for follow-up on the Mennonite-Catholic work. Other

conferences discussing the “Called Together” document are happening this year in Colombia and Germany.

“We are increasingly aware that we’re part of a larger Body of Christ,” said J. Ron Byler, Associate Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA. Byler called Bridgefolk a model for interchurch dialogue and cited the recent decision for Mennonite Church USA to join Christian Churches Together in the USA, a new organization composed of more than 35 churches and national organizations committed to working together on issues essential to Christian witness.

But, as Gerald Schlabach, Bridgefolk’s executive director said, “Different people are at different places on the bridge.”

Barbara Berger of Sacramento, California said that spending time with Mennonites has given her a global perspective. “These people have been places. When you listen to them, you feel like you really know what’s happening on the ground in Bangladesh or Nicaragua or Iran. It’s discipleship in action.” But the dialogue reminds Berger of what she loves about her own Catholic faith, including the deep sense of mystery that’s conveyed in the Mass.

George Dupuy, pastor of Big Spring Mennonite Church in Luray, Virginia, understands. “Since many of the early Anabaptist reformers were Catholic clergy, our task is one of recovering what we lost, not simply learning something new,” he said. “We relearn the beauty of mystery and holiness in liturgy from the Mass, and the gift of contemplation and silence from the mystics.”

Social justice activities first put Patrick O’Bryan in touch with Mennonites in Ohio. “We weren’t looking for these relationships. We were just drawn to each other,” said O’Bryan, who works for the Diocese of Cleveland. He says it’s likely his experience is not all that unusual. “I imagine there are a lot more Bridgefolk out there who don’t know it yet.”

Bridgefolk’s next gathering is set for July 2008 at St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota. Brenda Bellamy, a once Mennonite-now-Catholic from Seattle, Washington hopes to be there. “What we’re doing won’t change the whole church,” she said, “but it’s a small step toward unity.”

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