

Church Relations Update



Last week, I sat in on Dr. Allison McFarland's marketing research class. The students had spent the semester doing, among other things, a marketing research study of Bethel College chapel. Specifically, they were trying to discover why students did – or did not – attend chapel (chapel at Bethel, in good Anabaptist fashion, is voluntary, not mandatory).

The research was conducted carefully and appropriately, and the information conveyed was useful and significant. There were suggestions about more effective marketing and communication about chapel, some recommendations regarding worship style and "relevance," and so on.

But for me the most salient learning came during the discussion time. Guadalupe Gonzalez noted that she came to chapel one time, just to get a better feel for this enterprise the class was researching. She noted that when she walked into the chapel, it was very clear that there was a large group of people who felt as though they "belonged." They sat together, spoke with each other and clearly knew what was happening and what to expect. She, on the other hand, being a "visitor," felt immediately like an outsider. She sat apart from the others and no one made a move to invite her to sit closer. In fact, she felt systematically ignored. Her status as an "outsider" was affirmed and reaffirmed.

I found this disappointing to hear, but very revealing. It helped me understand (finally) why students tend to characterize chapel at Bethel as "Mennonite worship." I've always found that description a bit puzzling. I don't think of our worship as "Mennonite." We often experiment with other worship traditions (e.g., we've been doing Ash Wednesday services for 30 years; if Yom Kippur falls on a Wednesday, we've sometimes done a Yom Kippur service). We sometimes turn the service over to other groups (e.g., a black gospel choir). We do sing out of *Hymnal; A Worship Book*, and we do sing a lot of hymns. But Mennonites aren't the only people who sing hymns. If you doubt that, listen to "A Prairie Home Companion" sometime. So why is this "Mennonite worship"?

What is indisputable about chapel is that the regular attendees are heavily Mennonite. I would guess that the Mennonite percentage in a typical chapel service is more than twice the Mennonite percentage for the campus as a whole (about 38 percent). And an aggregation of "Mennonites worshipping" becomes "Mennonite worship." That's one learning I took from Guadalupe's comment.

The second learning is that I think she managed to describe Mennonite Church USA's growth problem in a nutshell. We are a far-too-inward-focused people. When we find a group of fellow believers with whom we are comfortable, we clump together. We don't consciously intend to exclude others, but that is the almost inevitable result. Little wonder our churches tend not to grow. One trip to chapel is all it took to convince Guadalupe that this wasn't her community. And that decision, I submit, had almost nothing to do with theology or worship style. That decision had to do with relationship-building, or lack thereof.

That learning brought me back to one of my favorite essays in Kathleen Norris' *The Cloister Walk*. The essay is entitled "Augustine" (pp. 346-48 in my edition), but the key player in the essay, in my mind, is Cecil Williams, pastor of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. Norris quotes Williams: "When people come to Glide, we don't ask them if they are atheists, Methodists or Buddhists. We ask them what their names are and how they're doing." "Blessed," says Norris, "be those who throw the church doors open wide" (348).

So why do we Mennonites have such a problem throwing the church doors open wide? The answer, I think, is fairly obvious. Given our theological emphasis on right behavior, we are concerned about purity – about maintaining a church "without spot or wrinkle" as our Anabaptist forebears might have put it. However noble that sentiment, it almost invariably leads to a sense of self-righteousness and exclusivity. And the people in that camp during Jesus' day were the Pharisees, not the followers of Jesus. Ouch!

Guadalupe's observation made crystal clear that we have some work to do in this regard, but I continue to believe that this is one area where Mennonite colleges might have something to teach Mennonite churches. The very nature

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of our enterprise dictates that we experience much broader diversity in our student bodies than would be found in the average congregation. We experience not only denominational diversity, but wide diversity of faiths – or lack thereof. We have Jewish and Muslim and Buddhist students. We have self-proclaimed agnostics and atheists (sometimes from Mennonite homes). Now, because chapel is voluntary, the students on this end of the spectrum rarely – if ever – visit chapel. But it happens. Sometimes, in fact, they are asked (and agree) to offer a reflection in a chapel service. Sometimes that makes the folks on my chapel planning committee uncomfortable. Some would like to see more theological purity coming from any public presentations in chapel. I, on the other hand, have always argued that chapel is “the Bethel College community at worship.” Because that community is very diverse, there will be – indeed should be – some diversity of theology expressed.

So, does that mean that “Mennonite orthodoxy” gets subverted or missed by Bethel students because it’s not proclaimed consistently in our worship services? I don’t think you need to worry about that.

Each year the Student Activities Committee sponsors the Bubbert Awards film night. Students are invited to produce short videos which are then judged by a committee of faculty. The entries are always incredibly creative and often quite funny.

This year I was struck by a video entitled “Ima Mennonite.” It was produced by Jordyn Blanson, a senior from Oklahoma City. Jordyn is African-American, Baptist and a basketball player. She is most definitely not Mennonite. The video was a rap describing Mennonites. It was creative, it was funny and I would say that, although exaggerated for effect, it described Mennonite orthodoxy quite accurately.

So what do I take from all this? I think we at Bethel College (and Mennonite Church USA) need to worry a bit less about maintaining purity and a bit more about “throwing the church doors open wide.” I’d welcome your comments and reactions.

Stop by the Bethel booth

Summertime is area conference meeting time and 2012 is no exception. Bethel will be represented at seven area conferences this summer. Listed below are the conferences, the meeting time and place and the Bethel representative scheduled to be present:

- Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, San Francisco, June 15-16 – Dale Schrag
- Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, Moses Lake, Wash., June 21-23 – Perry White
- Central District Conference, Normal, Ill., June 21-23 – Dale Schrag
- Central Plains Mennonite Conference, Henderson, Neb., June 28-July 1 – Dale Schrag
- South Central Mennonite Conference, South Hutchinson, Kan., June 29-July 1 – Perry White
- Western District Conference, Oklahoma City, July 6-8 – Perry White, Dale Schrag, Dave Linscheid, Rosa Barrera, Tony Graber (and probably others as well)
- Mountain States Mennonite Conference, La Junta, Colo., August 3-5 – Perry White

In addition, the following Bethel faculty and administrative staff have been invited to attend the Mennonite University Faculty Conference to be held at Goshen College and AMBS, August 1-3:

- Aaron Austin, vice president for student life
- Nathan Bartel, literary studies
- Brad Born, vice president for academic affairs
- Francisca Méndez-Harclerode, biology
- Dale Schrag, church relations/campus pastor
- Patty Shelly, Bible and religion
- Megan Upton Tyner, theater
- Hamilton Williams, social work