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Office of Church Relations
Bethel College
North Newton, Kansas
67117-8061
www.bethelks.edu/churchrelations

Church Relations Update

On Hospitality, Ethnicity and Presidential Transition



By Dale Schrag

I've been thinking a lot about hospitality this summer. The thought process began when I set out to make a DVD about

Bethel College for the Central Plains Mennonite Conference annual meeting in Mountain Lake, Minn., 24-27 June. I chose to focus on our new campus ministries house, the Agape Center. And, more specifically, to talk about the plaque beside the entry door that reads "*Omnes supervenientes hospites tamquam Christus suscipiantur.*" These are the opening words of the 53rd chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict: "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ." The scripture text St. Benedict used is, of course, Matthew 25:35, when Jesus says, "I came as a guest and you received me." I went on to quote Benedict later in Chapter 53, when he says, "In the reception of the poor and pilgrims the greatest care and solicitude should be shown, because *it is especially in them* [italics mine] that Christ is received; for as far as the rich are concerned, the very fear which they inspire wins respect for them."

I noted that at our Bethel faculty and staff fall retreat in August 2009, we focused on this Benedictine text in our worship service. We considered "Who are the poor at Bethel College? Who are the students (and others) who come without the advantages of legacy ties, Mennonite names, big scholarships? And what would it mean to treat these 'poor' with 'the greatest care and solicitude'?" I'm not sure we came up with many concrete answers, but I'm inclined to think the discussion itself may have contributed

to what was an extraordinarily positive year on the Bethel campus.

So what does all this have to do with ethnicity? The featured speaker at Central Plains this summer was David Boshart of West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa (as of 1 Sept., the new executive conference minister of CPMC). David gave three excellent presentations focusing on how we might make mission the central focus of our story. He described three core commitments of the church in mission: biblical discernment, three-dimensional hospitality and contextual witness. Ah, there's that hospitality word again. As David discussed hospitality, he seemed to go St. Benedict one better. He declared that we can't just "welcome" the stranger. If that's all we do, we remain in the power position. To be truly missional, David suggested, we need to be vulnerable enough to receive the hospitality of the stranger, open enough to learn from the stranger.

As I listened to David discuss hospitality, I kept thinking back to C. J. Dyck's Menno Simons lectures at Bethel College in 1981, on Dutch Anabaptism and its impact on Mennonites today. He spoke at length about the debacle at Münster and the bitter persecution unleashed on the Anabaptists as a result. He said (and I'm paraphrasing here): "I can tell during the first week of class at AMBS which of my students have European ethnic Mennonite roots, and I can tell without even looking at their surnames. They will not talk initially. They will wait to make sure this is a safe place to talk, that what they want to say will sound at least as intelligent as what the other students are saying. Once they are convinced it's a safe environment, they will talk without ceasing. But the initial impulse is reticence. That," said C. J. Dyck, "is the legacy of Münster."

Well, if C. J. Dyck was right (and I think he was), then one could argue that Mennonites with European ethnic roots,

in bold contrast to St. Benedict, are in fact more likely to suspect the devil in the stranger than they are to see Christ in the stranger. Put another way, strangers in our European ethnic Mennonite midst are not presumed innocent until proven guilty; they are presumed guilty until they can demonstrate their innocence. If that's the case (to go back to David Boshart's argument), we've got a long way to go before we will reflexively allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to receive the hospitality of the stranger.

And now, finally, what does all this have to do with the presidential transition at Bethel College? President Perry D. White comes to Bethel, after all, without Mennonite connections. He was raised Southern Baptist so he is not a total stranger to the Anabaptist tradition, but he attended a Lutheran college and he's worked at a Presbyterian college and a Roman Catholic college. So Perry White's coming now to Bethel College is a kind of test case for the issues discussed above. Will he be welcomed in Benedictine fashion? Will he be treated with "the greatest care and solicitude" because his lack of concrete Mennonite connections makes him one of the "poor" among us? Will he, à la David Boshart, be more than simply welcomed? Will we, as a college and as a church, make ourselves vulnerable enough to learn from him? (Given the ecumenical range of his education experience, he may have a lot to teach us.) Or will we allow our suspicions to rule? Will we conclude that the lack of Mennonite connections calls into question the legitimacy of his faith? Will we consider him guilty until he proves himself innocent?

The way we choose to respond may say a great deal about how poised we are to be a truly hospitable – indeed, missional – people.

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Another Good Year Under Way

The new academic year has started on a positive note. Perry and Dalene White are bringing new energy and enthusiasm to campus and there's a lot to be enthusiastic about. Enrollment is up roughly 10 percent from last fall; 20 percent from last spring. Fall to fall retention of last year's freshman class was the highest since we started keeping those statistics back in 1976.

Attendance has averaged 135 for the first three chapels. Thanks in no small part to the student chaplains (see article below), there are spiritual life activities in addition to chapel that occur every day of the week. The following list does not include all activities because there are several cluster groups that meet regularly in the Agape Center, but here's a typical week:

- Sunday, 6:30 p.m., praying the Divine Office (meets in the Little Chapel of Bethel College Mennonite Church)
- Monday, 9:30 p.m., Bible study with Chad and Jody Childs (meets in the Agape Center in the Richert House)
- Tuesday, 12:30 p.m., Fellowship of Christian Athletes (meets in Schultz Student Center seminar rooms)
- Wednesday, 11 a.m., weekly chapel service (meets in the Ad Building chapel)
- Wednesday, 9 p.m., Project 88 (meets in the Haury Hall Hub)
- Wednesday, 9 p.m., hymn sing (meets in the Ad Building chapel)
- Thursday, 10 p.m., informal worship (meets at Memorial Grove as long as the weather holds)
- Friday, 7:30 a.m., structured prayer time (meets in the Agape Center)
- Saturday (time varies according to the pre-game meal), football pre-game Bible study (meets in Schultz Student Center seminar rooms)

Meet the Student Chaplains

Naomi Graber: I am a junior from Elkhart, Ind. I absolutely love being at Bethel, and all the opportunities surrounding me with wonderful professors, staff and friends. I enjoy participating in music groups on campus, including Concert Choir and Wind Ensemble. As a student chaplain, I feel passionate about finding a place for everyone, not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of the whole community. I hope and pray for everyone to have the space and support needed for mature seeking, as well as the encouragement and wisdom for sincere faithfulness.



John Miller: I am a junior from Partridge, Kan., majoring in history and Bible and religion. After two years at Goshen (Ind.) College, a year in MCC's SALT program in China and a term at L'abri in Massachusetts, I transferred to Bethel last spring. This past summer, I participated in the Ministry Inquiry Program at Christ Community Church in Des Moines, Iowa. As student chaplain, I hope to enrich prayer life on campus by facilitating a Divine Office prayer group. Given the transformative power of a life of gratitude and prayer, my broader wish is to see the Bethel community root itself in prayerful communion with the Divine and with others.



Caleb Regehr: I'm a senior business major from Whitewater, Kan. My hope for this year is to get to know people and better understand their faith background – I think diversity can be a tremendous tool for personal growth. Since I am planning to go on to seminary after I graduate, this opportunity to be a student chaplain could not have come at a better time for me. I look forward to growing in my relationship with Christ, along with others here at Bethel this year.



Caleb Stephens: I am a senior social work major from Lawrence, Kan. My identity has been made complete through Christ's hand at Bethel College.



My life turned around dramatically throughout freshman year and especially through the summer before my sophomore year. God scooped me up that summer, and his constant presence on this campus has carried and sustained me through many difficulties, struggles and fears. My hope is that I can be a representative of what it means to be a man of God – whether through genuine conversation, intentional encouragement or being someone to lean on. I want to be what those who helped shape me have been. I want to make an impact.

Some Events Worth Noting

Oct. 8-10:

Bethel's annual Fall Festival. Take special note of the Fall Festival Worship Service at 10 a.m. Sunday, Oct. 10, which will take place in Memorial Hall instead of Bethel College Mennonite Church. Focusing on the theme "Abiding in Hope" (based on Romans 15:13), the service will feature the Bethel College Concert Choir and the Bethel College Wind Ensemble, a number of wonderful congregational hymns (HWB 43, 343, 366, 507 and 118), reflections by a student, a faculty member and Weston Noble (Perry White's musical and spiritual mentor during his undergraduate days at Luther College) and last, but certainly not least, the inauguration of Dr. Perry D. White as the 14th president of Bethel College. You are all cordially invited to attend.

Oct. 31-Nov. 2:

The 59th annual Menno Simons Lectures featuring John D. Roth of Goshen College speaking on "The Future of Anabaptism as a Global Movement." All lectures will take place in Krehbiel Auditorium in the Fine Arts Center. Individual lectures are as follows:

- Sunday, Oct. 31, 7:30 p.m.: "What Hath Zurich to Do with Addis Ababa?: Anabaptism as a Global Movement"

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- Monday, Nov. 1, 11 a.m.: “The Christian Faith in Global Perspective”
- Monday, Nov. 1, 7:30 p.m.: “Tap Root or Rhizome?: Retelling the Anabaptist Story as if the Global Church Mattered”
- Tuesday, Nov. 2, 7:30 p.m.: “The Coming Shape of Anabaptism: Envisioning the Global Mennonite Church of the Future”

Nov. 8:

A convocation by Frank Cordaro, a former parish priest and founder and member of the Des Moines Catholic Worker community, “Loving Your Enemies: Did Jesus Really Mean It?,” 11 a.m., Krehbiel Auditorium

Nov. 12:

A convocation by Felipe Hinojosa, member of the MC USA Historical Committee and faculty member at Texas A&M University, “A Latino Perspective on the Arizona Immigration Law,” 11 a.m., Krehbiel Auditorium

Dec. 5:

A new venture, “Lessons and Carols” featuring the Bethel College choirs, the Newton Chorale and the Newton Mid-Kansas Symphony Orchestra. The concert will be in Memorial Hall at 7 p.m.

Dec. 10:

Messiah sing in the Bethel College Mennonite Church, featuring the Bethel College orchestra, student soloists and conductors and everyone in the audience singing the chorus parts of the Christmas section of Handel’s *Messiah*. This is a convocation, so it begins at 11 a.m. and ends around noon.

Dec. 12:

Bethel’s annual Lighting of the Green on the campus Green at 8 p.m. Participants form a circle of light around the Green with candles while listening to Scripture and singing carols. The service lasts only 15-20 minutes and is followed by refreshments in Schultz Student Center.



*Bethel
College*

300 East 27th Street
North Newton, Kansas
67117-8061

316/283-2500