



Church Relations Update

Bethel College

Office of Church Relations
Bethel College
North Newton, Kansas
67117-0531
www.bethelks.edu/churchrelations

On the Demise of Dialogue



By Dale Schrag
Director of
Church Relations

Several weeks ago I attended a moving chapel service on "Faith and Science." The service featured two brief reflections, one by a student, the other by professor of chemistry Richard Zerger. I should perhaps explain at the outset that Richard and I have a lot in common. We are the same age; we grew up in the Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, Kansas, community; we attended the same Sunday School class; we both went to Bethel College, graduating in 1969; we are second cousins.

Richard noted that in his growing up years, and even in his time at Bethel College and in graduate school, he never experienced serious tension between science and faith. As his understanding of the scientific world increased, so did the depth of his Christian convictions. It was as though science and faith were on parallel tracks, much more often complementary than conflicting.

As I listened to Richard, I immediately thought, "That's my story. That was my experience." Now, it's certainly possible that my experience so resembles Richard's simply because we have so much in common. Perhaps our common community, our common church, our common genetics, our common educa-

tion explain it all. Perhaps...but I think there's more to it than that. I think Richard and I came to adulthood in a less polarized and polarizing time than we live in today. I think it was a time when ideas could much more comfortably be held in tension than is the case today. Differences of opinion in such a time are cause for conversation and dialogue, rather than evidence of righteousness or damnation.

So why has the world become so polarized and polarizing? I'm no expert, but I do have some theories. I think it has much to do with the pace of change; I think it has something to do with the power of media; and I think these factors combine to generate a climate of fear. And we get no help from our government on this one. Once our president told us "we have nothing to fear but fear itself." Now our president implies that our worst mistake would be to be insufficiently afraid. A climate of fear encourages fundamentalism—of all stripes: Islamic fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, fundamentalism of the right, and fundamentalism of the left.

And what's even worse, from my perspective, is that this polarized and polarizing culture, this climate of fear, has invaded the church—even the Mennonite church. Once again we find ourselves reflecting the prevailing culture rather than critiquing that culture. What's wrong with that? Well, for openers, as Kathleen Norris points out (*Amazing Grace*, 144), "all the angels of scripture, and Jesus himself on occasion, say to people whom they encounter, 'Fear not.'" Do we live in a more dangerous world than we once

did? Yes. Are the chances of being struck down by a random act of violence greater than they once were? Probably. Does this mean that the resurrection of Jesus no longer has any power over death? Absolutely not. Then why do we allow ourselves to live in constant fear for our lives and the lives of those we love? Menno Simons once said,

If your faith is as you say, why do you not do the things which He has commanded in His word [e.g., "Fear not."]? Since you do not do as He commands and desires, but as you please, it is sufficiently proved that you do not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, although you say so. ("The New Birth," *Collected Writings*, 96)

Second, taking the polarization of the prevailing culture into our congregations is almost certain to keep us from being the kind of discerning community we are called, by Christ, to be. True discernment demands both diversity and conversation. If our congregations are too homogeneous, there is too little diversity; if our congregations are too polarized, there is no conversation. Surely those of us who claim to follow Jesus must commit ourselves to a higher standard, a standard set down in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi (a congregation that almost certainly exhibited more socio-economic, and even ethnic, diversity than would be seen in a typical Mennonite congregation today):

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the

Church Relations **Update**

Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to his own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. May it be so.

Bethel takes education on the road with Dallas writing workshop



*By Melanie Zuercher
Institutional
Communications
Writer/Editor*

Sometimes the best way for a college to serve its constituency is to ask.

Bethel College has been working for some time to develop a summer term course that will benefit Hispanic Mennonite churches and leaders, particularly in Texas. During a January conference call discussion with the board of directors of the Leadership and Learning Institute, a program of the Dallas Mennonite churches, Bethel president Barry C. Bartel asked what might be an urgent need that Bethel could help LLI meet.

The answer: A class taught in Spanish on how to write a paper for graduate-level credit. Bartel suggested he come to meet with the board in person, and did so the weekend of Feb. 25-27, when he also preached at Peace Mennonite Church and Iglesia Menonita Mi Redentor.

From these two meetings, the idea developed for Bethel professor of Spanish Martha Peterka, who regularly teaches a similar curriculum on writing papers to her upper-level Spanish students, to come to Dallas and do it there in a weekend intensive course.

The class, which Peterka gave April 20-21, came under the auspices of LLI, a nonprofit entity that the Dallas churches founded in 2002 “to enhance the ministry and outreach of urban churches.” One of LLI’s primary goals is to provide educational services, including distance education through Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., for pastors and church lay leaders.

As part of a \$1.6 million Lilly Grant for its Engaging Pastors initiative, AMBS launched the Seminario Biblico Anabautista in fall 2006 with the course *Misión y Paz* (Mission and Peace). John Driver, a long-time mission worker and theological educator in Latin America, taught the course in a two-weekend intensive in Dallas.

The Seminario is a way to provide theological education to pastors and church leaders whose fluency in English and ministerial responsibilities would make a full-time graduate degree at AMBS difficult. The Seminario offers a certificate in theological studies equivalent to AMBS’ one-year certificate. However, the *Certificado* courses will be presented entirely in Spanish, on-site in Texas.

By all accounts, the inaugural course was a success. However, as with any new venture, there were some wrinkles to be ironed out. One was class members’ request for some help brushing up on their term paper-writing skills.

Peterka admitted to some nervousness going into the venture – although she had taught a similar class many times, it had never been in a four-session block over only two days. However, she says, she

came home feeling the effort had been worthwhile.

The main thrust of the class was to teach the mechanics of writing a standard academic paper – including format, style, paragraph organization and thesis statement – and a critical review. There were 12 participants, ranging in age from teens to 80-plus, with educational experiences almost as varied.

Peterka did not ask her students for written evaluations at the end of the class but said that already by Saturday morning, she was getting oral affirmation and even hugs from her students. “They told me how much they had learned, and how helpful the information would be in enabling them to succeed in subsequent [Seminario] classes. Several times I was told my being there was a blessing from God.”

“We were very pleased,” said Esther Martinez, LLI executive director. “Martha was an excellent teacher who was able to teach us at all educational levels. She was very well prepared and she was very sensitive to the needs of all. I believe the project was a great success. Thank you for the opportunity of partnering with Bethel College – you have truly been a blessing to our community.”

“Some things you do because they are the right thing to do,” Bartel said. “This was a need expressed by the LLI leadership, and Bethel has a professor with the skills needed. So it was a good fit and a good way to serve the churches.”

He added, “We look forward to furthering this relationship with these and other Hispanic churches. Who knows where that might lead?”

Favorite hymn

From Dale Schrag: *One of my favorite chapel services always occurs at the end of the year. It's a tradition that a number of seniors are invited to choose a hymn that has become especially meaningful to them during their years at Bethel, explain why it is meaningful, and then the assembled congregation sings that hymn one final time. Peter Goerzen, senior computer science major from Goessel, Kansas, was*



one of three students who spoke in chapel on May 2. The hymn he chose was 567, "How firm a foundation." When I heard Peter's reflection on why the hymn has special meaning for him, I knew that it needed to be shared far beyond the confines of that chapel space on May 2. So here it is:



**By Peter Goerzen,
senior**

Sometime during my freshman year here at Bethel, I was feeling especially stressed about schoolwork, and I knew I was struggling to make time for God. Late at night, after I had finished my studying and writing, I decided I'd go on a walk around campus – to unwind before bed, to pray. I can't say I remember what I thought about or how much it really helped me unwind, but something about it must have been right, because over the past four years, I have continued to find myself on these sidewalks at Bethel late at night before going to bed – sometimes almost every night, at other times, sadly, irregularly, but God's presence is surely always there.

The campus is indeed beautiful at night – the soft bollard lights along the sidewalk, the beloved buildings looking even more majestic in their night-time veils, highlighted by the moon and lights on campus, the cool breezes of spring and fall and the trees, the shrubs, flowers, and grass peeking through the night-time shadows to calm the spirit, the occasional ice or snow sparkling in the cold, crisp, still winter nights to give clarity of thought, reminding me of God's light and the Spirit's warmth.

And so I go on these walks, as I am able, to clear my thoughts before I go to bed, to relax, to pray, to find God, to breathe. I walk to take my mind's focus off of my own schedule and stresses and remind myself of the expanse of creation, the world in which I live, the people with whom I eat, neighbors around the world with whom I share the Earth, the God in whom I trust. As I walk from the mods to Science Hall, I try to clear my thoughts of

the papers that are left to write, the pages to read, tests to take, the programming problem that I just haven't been able to solve. Sometimes my mind and my heart are quieted and opened, sometimes the noise and static remains.

The buildings help me focus and take my thoughts off of myself. As I walk in front of the Ad Building, I think about Bethel – the people, the leaders, the joys and struggles of the learnings in classrooms and beyond, the service, the faith that surrounds it all. Then the libraries remind me of my neighbors world-wide. I remember my brothers and sisters who are bleeding in Darfur, the shrapnel flying in Iraq, the desolate, the homeless here in Newton and Wichita, unnamed faces the world over, darkened by the injustices of violence and hunger. Why, O God of creation, must the Earth cry out in pain? Why, O God of peace, must the world yet bleed? And I think about the ways the Spirit's winds of peace blow throughout the world, the peacemakers and relief workers being God's face and hands in their own communities and beyond. I think about joys and struggles of the people around the world as they seek the Divine in their midst, and I wonder where my place might be in it all.

Schultz Student Center reminds me of my fellow students – the person sitting next to me in class, those with whom I eat my meals, share my living space, the familiar and less familiar faces I meet along the sidewalks and with whom I exchange a smile, a nod, a simple greeting, and I share with them their pain and stress and happiness. Soon the sidewalk takes me in front of the Fine Arts Center, and I think about my family near and far, and with them too, I share the struggles and joys of birth and life and death.

On my way back to the mods, I pause on the sidewalk between the Fine Arts Center and gaze across the Green to the Ad building, its face glowing in its night-time lighting. As I look at this old, stone building, I remember the college's motto, "Other foundation can no one lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." I think about these words of Paul, the vision of my Anabaptist forebearers, of Menno Simons, of the faith that founded this institution. I wonder if Jesus Christ is my

foundation – or if school, or friends, and other work have replaced this stone foundation with the sands of transience, of self, of busy-ness. Often, it seems, the answer is not what I would like it to be, and the stones call me once again to build my life around Christ, to center my learning, my relationships, my work around God, to let God breathe in me and through me. As I continue on my way, I wonder what it means to build a life around Jesus. I wonder what it means to live a life of prayer, of radical simplicity, service, peace, justice, and love. I wonder what it means to take up my cross. I wonder what it means to be made alive again. I wonder what it means to be a child. I wonder what it means for Jesus Christ to be the firm foundation of my life, yet I find peace in comfort in this foundation that is laid, as does this old hymn, which has grown dear to me through these late-night walks. How firm a foundation, this refuge, direction, this strength and presence amid life's trials and joys.

As I approach the last two bollard lights on my walk, I look up at the starry sky, still trying to hold out against the light pollution of human expansion and "progress." I'm at peace not to have all the answers, I know that God is with me, that God is with us. The Lord's Prayer appears on my lips. Bread, prayer, forgiveness of debt and sin, God's will, God's Kingdom. Other Foundation can no one lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent Word! What more can he say than to you he hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled.