

# Church Relations Update

## Seeking an Open Palm

### Here are the facts:

Someone from *The Newton Kansan* called the person who arranges for renting Bethel College facilities to reserve Memorial Hall for two events (Mem Hall can accommodate up to 1,800 people, making it by far the largest indoor facility in Harvey County). The two events requested were an appearance by the New Christy Minstrels Feb. 22 and “a jazz band” March 5. Mem Hall was available both evenings, so a contract with the *Kansan* was prepared and signed by both parties.

Should we have asked about the affiliation of the jazz band? Absolutely. That was a mistake that should not happen again. But it was not until advertisements began appearing in the *Kansan* promoting the concert by the Jazz Ambassadors of the U.S. Army Field Band that we on campus became aware that the jazz band coming to play in Mem Hall on March 5 was affiliated with the U.S. military.

The college responded by contacting the *Kansan* to insist that no overt recruiting for the military could take place during the evening event. But we chose not to break the contract. We did place a table in the Mem Hall lobby with standard admissions materials and additional materials that articulated clearly the college’s four ethics of discipleship, scholarship, service and integrity (including our Anabaptist identity and commitment to peacemaking).

The concert went on as scheduled. I did not attend, but heard the following reports: 1) the music was outstanding; 2) not only was there no “overt recruiting,” but the bandmaster read a poem he had written that referred to the fact that they were prohibited from recruiting and, at another point, paid tribute to the Mennonites for their hospitality; 3) there were no protests or demonstrations; and 4) a good time was apparently had by all, many of whom had never been on the Bethel College campus before.

It seems to me there are (at least) two ways to view this event. One can see it as clear evidence of Bethel College softening or relinquishing its commitment to peace. It would appear that some in our constituency have chosen to view it in that way. Were we convinced that perception is accurate,

we would awkwardly confess that we were apparently not vigilant enough; we would apologize to our constituency for the mistake; we would promise never to let this happen again; and we would try to put the whole, unfortunate incident behind us.

But, in fact, we do not see the appearance of the Army band as in any way indicative of a softening or relinquishing of Bethel College’s commitment to peace. That commitment is an intrinsic part of our almost 125-year history. That commitment is articulated in our current mission statement. That commitment is reflected in a General Education curriculum that demands that every Bethel graduate have at least one course with a “peace, justice or conflict resolution” focus. That commitment can be seen in a convocation program that, this year, features 22 of 56 convocations with a peace and/or social justice focus.

Certainly Bethel College has changed in the last 25 years (I’ve been here 27), but the change has not been in our commitment to peace and social justice. The change has been in our willingness to hold that conviction – and all other convictions – in an open palm rather than in a closed fist. Surely you would agree that our world has too many closed fists – on the left and the right, among Muslims and Christians, even among Democrats and Republicans. You cannot shake hands with a closed fist; you cannot comfort a crying baby with a closed fist; you cannot wash another’s feet with a closed fist. Open palms are absolutely essential for an attitude of true hospitality and welcoming the stranger.

The fear is always that convictions held in an open palm are more tentative and tenuous than convictions held in a closed fist. But isn’t it possible that precisely the opposite is true? I remember that when John Esau was director of ministerial leadership for the General Conference Mennonite Church, he once commented: “It is inevitably when I am the most comfortable with being Mennonite that I am the most open to ecumenical conversation, to dialogue with ‘the other’; it is when I am least comfortable with being Mennonite that I seek to avoid such conversation.”

Might there be a lesson for all of us in that observation?

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## A Fabulous Choir Tour

When I report at the home concert every year that the recently completed Concert Choir tour was “fabulous,” I am reminded constantly that “you say that every year.” True enough, but just because it was “fabulous” last year does not mean that it cannot be equally – or even more – “fabulous” this year.

There was so much for which to be thankful on this tour: absolutely spectacular singing; enthusiastic audiences; unusually generous offerings; a chance to be of service at an event for the homeless of Salem, Ore.; the opportunity to be an essential part of an absolutely precious worship service at Menno Mennonite Church, Ritzville, Wash.; a chance to sing in two splendid venues – St. Aloysius Church in Spokane and the Mission Dolores Basilica in San Francisco.

One of the highlights of the tour for me may well have been our time at Portland Mennonite Church. Portland Mennonite is a great place to sing. The building has wonderful acoustics. Our concert was outstanding. A number of individuals suggested it may have been the best concert they had ever heard in that church.

But what made that occasion extra-special for me was the fact that the kitchen crew reported (after they had fed the choir upon our arrival) that this was perhaps the most gracious and thankful group of students they had ever served. That, my friends, makes for an absolutely fabulous choir tour.

## Some Events Worth Noting

- April 25** **C. Henry Smith Peace Oration Finals** in convocation, Krehbiel Auditorium, 11 a.m.
- April 29** **“Seeking Peace among Christians, Jews and Muslims,”** a convocation presentation by Duane Friesen, Edmund G. Kaufman Professor Emeritus of Bible and Religion, Krehbiel Auditorium, 11 a.m.
- May 2** **“Schubert’s *Mass in E-flat Major*,”** a convocation presentation by William Eash discussing the major work featured in the May 8 Masterworks Concert, Krehbiel Auditorium, 11 a.m.
- May 5-6** **Spring drama, *Wit*,** a Pulitzer Prize-winning play focusing on end-of-life issues, Krehbiel Auditorium, 7:30 p.m.
- May 6** **“Out of Breath,”** a convocation featuring Margaret Edson, author of *Wit*, Krehbiel Auditorium, 11 a.m.
- May 7** **Spring drama, *Wit*,** a Pulitzer Prize-winning play focusing on end-of-life issues, Krehbiel Auditorium, 1:30 p.m. matinee
- May 8** **Masterworks Concert** featuring Schubert’s *Mass in E-flat Major*, Memorial Hall, 4 p.m.
- May 15** **Open Road Spring Concert,** Memorial Hall, 7 p.m.
- May 22** **Baccalaureate,** Bethel College Mennonite Church, 10:30 a.m.  
**Commencement,** Thresher Stadium, 4 p.m.