

Fall 2004

The BRIDGE

Newsletter of the Bridgefolk Movement

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Miracle in Japan
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Letters, Stories, Personals**

Bridgefolk • Catholics and Mennonites Bridging the Divide

2004 Bridgefolk Conference

Singing, Stories, Worship, Friendship

*Mennonites and Catholics wash each others feet
at this summer's Bridgefolk conference at Saint John's.*



The Bridgefolk conference this summer both continued a tradition and broke new ground. It continued the tradition of holding annual conferences and it broke new ground by being the first conference attended by more Catholics than Mennonites.

This year's theme was "Spirituality and Discipleship" and it again brought together Mennonite and Catholic traditions in sometimes surprising ways.

This was especially apparent in the stories told by Abbott Eoin de Bhaldrathe, head of a Trappist monastery in Ireland, who discovered the Mennonite peace witness as a contemplative monk. In the same session Biff Wiedman, a Mennonite pastor from Elkhart, IN recounted his lifetime struggle to live out his "monkish" calling in a Mennonite context.

Michael Joncas and Ken Nafziger, two nationally known church musicians, one Catholic and the other Mennonite, sang together Joncas' hymn "On Eagles Wings"—a powerful example of the way music bridges our divisions.

The Saturday evening session combined a festive banquet provided by the monks of Saint John's, a Footwashing service that united Mennonites and Catholics in the ancient rite of mutual service, and a Mennonite style hymn sing led by Ken Nafziger.

Attendance this year was 60, about the same as the previous two years, but what was unique was that 32 of them were Catholics. At the first 1999 meeting only 6 of the 25 attendees were Catholic. At the first Saint John's conference in 2002 the number increased to 36% Catholic, and in 2003 it increased to 45%. This year it was 53%.

The percentage of repeat attendees has also increased each year. At the 2002 conference 24% had attended the previous conference. In 2003 the percentage was 55%, and this year it was 62%.

Ten attendees this year were from Canada, and one from Europe. 19 states and provinces were represented, from coast to coast. 31 of the 60 attendees were from the Midwest, 11 of them from Minnesota.

There are now 118 persons who have attended at least one of the Bridgefolk conferences. Of that number 63 are Mennonites and 54 are Catholics. The Bridgefolk mailing list now has over 200 names.

For more details see the Listening Committee Report on the Bridgefolk website.



Drew Christiansen, SJ, a national leader in Catholic thinking on issues of war and peace, speaks to the Bridgefolk participants during open discussion.



Michael Joncas, composer of the hymn "On Eagle's Wing" sings it together with Ken Nafziger, Mennonite musician who led the worship at this year's conference.



Mennonites and Catholics meet around the tables at a banquet hosted by the monks of Saint John's, for whom hospitality is a vocation.

Questions from the Hat

Again this year conference participants submitted anonymous questions about each other's traditions. Some examples:

"Does Abbot Klassen have Mennonite ancestors?"
(Answer: Yes, but he didn't know it until Bridgefolk.)

"What has been the evolution in Anabaptist theology and practice in the last 50 years?"

"What does 'concelebration' mean?"

"What is the significance of bowing during the creed?"

"What is the Mennonite position, doctrinal and practical, on homosexuality?"

"At Mass some people take the bread only and pass by the wine. Is there a theological reason, or is this personal preference?"

"How do the two faiths differ sacramentally and in church services?"

"Do Catholics vote in the presidential elections? If so, what teachings, rules and values guide their votes?"

"What translation of the Bible is used in Catholic liturgy or homes? Who decides that?"

“Right Remembering”

Second Martyrs Conference

Mennonite and Catholic scholars met for a second time this year prior to the Bridgefok conference for joint study of the persecution of Christians by other Christians in the Sixteenth Century. This year they laid plans for a permanent institute to carry this project forward.

Historians Brad Gregory of Notre Dame, Arnold Snyder of Conrad Grebel College, and Ivan Kauffman of Bridgefok discuss a new study of the Inquisition recently published by the Vatican.



The conference was entitled, “Sixteenth century martyrdom in ecumenical perspective,” and was organized by Bridgefok members Peter Erb and Ivan Kauffman. Sixteenth-century martyrdom became a topic of ecumenical discussion in 1998 when the Mennonite World Conference entered into a five-year dialogue with the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Two major contributors to the international dialogue, Drew Christiansen, S.J., and Helmut Harder, spoke at this year’s martyrs conference.

The importance of martyr history in ecumenical dialogue was emphasized in the keynote address by Margaret O’Gara, a leading Catholic ecumenist and theologian at the University of Toronto. Both Dr. O’Gara and Abbot John Klassen, spiritual leader of St. John’s Abbey, noted Pope John Paul II’s repeated call for repentance of past sins of violence and intolerance.

The purpose of the ecumenical conferences at St. John’s is to carry forward what the Pope calls the “purification of memory.” Others call it a “right remembering” of not only the Anabaptist martyr experience but also the persecution and hostility faced by Catholics and other Christians in other contexts.

C. Arnold Snyder, Mennonite professor of history at Conrad Grebel College in Ontario (Canada) and author of *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Orbis 2004), presented a case study of an early Anabaptist martyr, showing how his willingness to die for his faith followed directly from Anabaptist spirituality—*gelassenheit*, a heart surrendered or yielded to God’s grace and the Holy Spirit,

Brad Gregory, Catholic historian at the University of Notre Dame and author of the leading study of 16th-century martyrdom, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard 1999), commented that the most striking element of Snyder’s account “was the primacy of place that this martyr gave to the work of the Holy Spirit.” Gregory said this analysis was remarkable because it breaks down some firm, traditional scholarly distinctions within the Radical Reformation “between ‘spiritualists’ and biblically literalist, ethically radical Anabaptists.”

In a second case study, Professor Peter Erb of Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario (Canada), presented a paper on the Schwenkfelders, an eighteenth century German group that emigrated to Pennsylvania for religious freedom and has developed a strong martyr tradition.

Participants at this summer’s conference agreed that religious martyrdom deserves much greater study, especially in an ecumenical setting, so that the various Christian traditions can achieve a shared “right remembering” of historical facts. Further study of this kind was specifically recommended by the report of the international dialogue, “Called Together to Be Peacemakers”.

In urging the formation of a permanent institute Kauffman said, “The church today stands between a past marred by extensive violence and a future committed to peacemaking. We must somehow connect our historical past to our very different future.”

Conference participants endorsed the formation of an organizing committee to plan an institute dedicated to the ecumenical study of Christian martyrs.

— Mennonite World Conference release
from a report by Marilyn Stahl and Dirk Giseburt

In the heartland

Mennonite Catholic Bridge in Rural Iowa

A Mennonite pastor whose great-grandparents were Mennonite and Catholic is now building a bridge between the Mennonite congregation he leads and the local Catholic parish in their rural Iowa farm community.

David Boshart at his great-grandparents' grave marker, one born Catholic, the other Mennonite.



When David Boshart, pastor at West Union Mennonite Church in rural Iowa, looks out his living room window, he sees the tombstone of his once-Catholic great-grandfather, John Doolin, in the church cemetery.

Boshart, who grew up Mennonite in nearby Wayland, is part of a Mennonite family that has Catholic roots. His great-grandfather was one of the first Mennonite converts at West Union. And the congregation he now leads has shared strong friendships over the years with their Irish Catholic neighbors in this close-knit farming community.

Boshart treasures these ties and wants to do whatever he can to strengthen them. How Boshart came to be a part of this unlikely “communion of the saints” is a story he loves to tell.

“My great-great grandfather Tom Doolin settled here and went to St. Michaels, a Catholic church down the road in Holbrook,” Boshart says. “He was an alcoholic who became abusive when he was drunk and one night he was abusing his wife. When my great-grandfather, age 16, attempted to intervene, his father chased him off the property with an ax.”

“He ended up boarding at a Mennonite home, where he met my great-grandmother. It was not okay for a Mennonite gal to date a Catholic, so they passed notes back and forth in an empty fence post and eventually eloped in a bobsled. They gave birth to several girls—including my grandmother, Erma.”

“So here I am, the great-grandson of a Mennonite convert, who is now pastor of his former church. I didn’t realize how significant that was until I started here and sensed the importance of these roots—and the present-day relationships that they foster. They become more precious to me every day.”

He is especially touched by the fact that John Doolin forgave his father and reconciled with him. “When my great-grandfather heard that his estranged father could no longer care for himself and was in the county home, he brought him to live in his own home for his remaining years,” Boshart says.

This early interconnectedness between these rural Catholic and Mennonite communities also appeared in the spiritual family trees at the local Catholic parish, St. Michael’s, and West Union.

“Years ago, Bishop Abner Yoder at West Union and the priest at St. Michael’s were good friends,” Boshart said. “When that bishop died, the priest came to the funeral home for visitation. When he walked in there was dead silence, no pun intended.”

Over the years, that silence has turned into dialogues that in turn have turned into friendships.

Each year West Union Mennonite Church shares services and events with the Catholics from St. Michaels. They include a Thanksgiving service at West Union, a Christmas Eve service at the Catholic Church and a hog feed at West Union.

“One of my main priorities is to build bridges from our faith tradition to other traditions,” Boshart says.

“I ask the people in my congregation to follow their passion and I need to do the same. And I am passionate about these ecumenical relationships.”

— from a Mennonite Church USA news release
by Laurie L. Oswald

New era opens

Mennonites Enter Ecumenical Mainstream

Mennonites, who have not participated in ecumenical dialogue to a major extent, are now involved in conversations with other Christians throughout the world—both Protestant and Catholic.

This summer there were significant Mennonite ecumenical encounters in several places throughout the world.

In the early Sixteenth Century the religious and civil leaders of Zurich joined in putting down the new Anabaptist movement, considering it an equally grave threat to both orthodox Christian belief and to civil order.

This June their successors asked leaders of the international Mennonite community—many descended from the sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists—to come to Zurich for a formal apology.

The president of Mennonite World Conference, Dr. Larry Miller, was invited to preach from the Zurich cathedral's historic pulpit, and a stone marker was unveiled to mark the spot along the Limat River where the first Anabaptist martyr was drowned in 1527.

In a joint statement the Swiss leaders said, "We acknowledge this historic sin and, from today's point of view, consider it a betrayal of the gospel. Before God...we point to this dark side of the Reformation, and we ask God and you, dear brothers and sisters of the Mennonite faith, to forgive us."

The next month a group of Mennonite leaders gathered at the Fatima Retreat Center at Notre Dame for a ground-breaking strategy session to discuss ways for Mennonites to seek greater cooperation and understanding with other Christian traditions—Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox.

The meeting was convened by the Interchurch Relations Committee of the Mennonite Church USA, and was initiated by Al Meyer, a retired college professor who is leading the effort to involve Mennonites more deeply in ecumenical dialogue. "Jesus' calling for unity in John 17 is an imperative to be obeyed and not something we do only if we feel like it," he says.

The executive director of Mennonite Church USA, Jim Schrag, says, "We're at a stage of development when we have the opportunity to expand our witness and vision through connections with other Christian groups. We need to both learn from them and also to share our strengths." Several Bridgefolk participants, including Marlene Kropf, George Dupuy and Weldon Nisly participated in this consultation.

In August two Mennonites participated in the sessions of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. One was Chris Huebner of Canadian Mennonite Univ. in Winnipeg, one of nine younger theologians chosen to attend this international event. Huebner was a participant in the 2003 Martyrs Conference at Saint John's.

"It is tempting," Huebner says, "to assume that Mennonites ought to be especially concerned with some of the recent interest being paid to 'peace theology.' The danger is to focus on peace in such a way that we become ghettoized and thus limit our participation in the larger conversation and to take the notion of peace somehow to be prior to the theological commitments that make it intelligible."

In Paris the Jesuit Theology Faculty has asked Neal Blough, a Mennonite theologian and historian, to present a workshop on the history of the Mennonites and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists to Catholics. Blough is a member of the International Mennonite Catholic Dialogue and was a speaker at the 2003 Martyrs Conference at Saint John's.

And this winter the Mennonite World Conference and the Lutheran World Federation will begin a round of international dialogue, similar to the dialogue that has taken place over the past five years between Mennonites and Catholics. This follows a series of Mennonite Lutheran dialogues that took place on the national level in the United States recently.

— from *Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Church USA releases*

In Japan

A Mennonite Catholic Miracle

A Japanese Mennonite is invited to Rome to participate in the canonization ceremonies for a Catholic missionary to China who, unknown to him, had been asked to intercede for him as a young grad student who was facing death from leukemia.

Jun Yamada presents the relics of Saint Joseph Freinademetz to Pope John Paul at the canonization ceremony for the new saint in Rome last fall.



Photo by Br. Zbigniew Toczek, SVD

Jun Yamada is a university professor in Japan. His father is a Mennonite pastor in southern Japan, and he was raised a Mennonite.

In 1986 Jun had gone to Nagoya University for graduate studies in ancient Christian art, but only a few months later he was hospitalized, diagnosed with acute leukemia. He became very weak, his kidneys began to fail and he was often delirious or unconscious.

His parents and sister came from Kyushu to be with him, and his older brother, who was then studying at a Mennonite college in the US, also came.

A Catholic missionary priest from the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) who had been helping Jun with his research, often visited him in the hospital and prayed with him. Jun says, "I could see the tower of the seminary chapel from the window of my hospital room. Sometimes Fr. Fausone would turn on the lights in the tower during the seminarians' evening prayers as a sign that they were praying for me. That encouraged me."

What Jun did not know was that Fr. Fausone, as well as two other priests, were praying for him through the intercession of Blessed Joseph Freinademetz, a nineteenth century European SVD missionary to China who was already on the first step toward recognition as a Catholic saint.

The priests did not tell Jun they were asking Blessed Joseph to pray for him out of respect for Mennonite beliefs which do not include asking for the intercession of saints.

Jun's condition continued to deteriorate and plans were being made for his funeral. And then suddenly he began to recover. Six months later he left the hospital and has been healthy ever since.

It was not until fourteen years later that Jun learned of the prayers to the Catholic saint. That was when Catholics in Japan who wanted Joseph Freinademetz to be made a full-fledged Catholic saint opened an investigation into Jun's healing to determine if it could be attributed to the intercession of the prayers to Blessed Joseph. To be named a saint in the Catholic Church at least one miracle brought about by his or her intercession must be proven.

The investigation proclaimed Jun's healing a medically verified miracle in 2002. A year later, on Oct. 5, 2003, Saint Joseph Freinademetz was officially added to the list of Catholic saints, in a ceremony in Rome officiated by Pope John Paul.

Jun was asked to come to Rome to participate in the ceremony, presenting a relic of Saint Joseph's body to Pope John Paul.

Asked afterward whether he considers it paradoxical for Catholics to claim that a Mennonite was healed through prayers to a Catholic saint, Jun says, "I do not see a paradox in the fact that Catholics look upon my cure as a miracle. The ways of God are mysterious and open to many interpretations.

"I see my illness as a loving manifestation of the goodness and kindness of God. I hope those who prayed for me when I was ill will continue to pray for me. The Lord gave me a new lease on life, and I want to follow God's will during these extra years I have been granted."

—from an interview with Jun Yamada in Together in the Word, magazine of the Society of the Divine World

Marlene Kropf Named New Bridgefolk Co-chair

A Mennonite denominational leader who was one of the founders of Bridgefolk accepts the post of Mennonite co-chair,



One of the co-founders of Bridgefolk, Marlene Kropf, has agreed to accept the office of Mennonite co-chair of the Bridgefolk board. Abbot John Klassen of Saint John's Abbey continues as the Catholic co-chair. Marlene replaces Gerald Schlabach, who continues to serve as Bridgefolk coordinator.

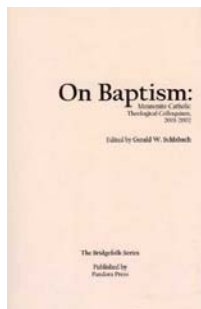
Marlene is Minister of Worship for the largest of the Mennonite denominations, Mennonite Church USA and is also Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation and Worship at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, IN. She has been a leader in the development of new worship styles in the Mennonite community.

With Ken Nafziger she wrote a widely noted book on the importance of singing in Mennonite worship, and has been influential in introducing the idea of hymn singing as a sacramental activity.

With her husband Stan she attended the first Bridgefolk conference at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center in 1999 and they were part of a small group that met at Saint John's early in 2001 and initiated the association with Saint John's Abbey that has led to the annual conferences there. They were also members of the Bridgefolk delegation that visited the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome in May 2003. The Kropfs have two children.

First Books in Bridgefolk Series Published

Catholic and Mennonite theologians have been discussing two of the most difficult issues dividing their traditions—baptism and the ethics of warfare. Now their discussions have been published in a new Bridgefolk series.



The first two volumes in the new Bridgefolk Series are now off the press. They are the results of the Mennonite Catholic Theological Colloquium, which was convened four years ago by Bridgefolk leaders Gerald Schlabach and Ivan Kauffman to stimulate conversation between Mennonite and Catholic theologians on the major issues then being discussed by the International Mennonite Catholic Dialogue.

Fifteen theologians were invited to participate in an email exchange of papers and comments over a period of months. About one third of the participants were Mennonites, a third were Catholics, and a third were persons like the conveners who had commitments to both traditions.

The first two volumes make available to the public the discussions on baptism, which took place in 2001, and the discussions of the concept of Just Policing which took place in 2002.



The lead paper in the volume on baptism is by the Catholic theologian, Frederick C. Bauerschmidt. The Mennonite response is by Thomas Finger, and there are further comments by the Mennonite scholar Alan Kreider, and others. The lead paper in the volume on just policing is by Gerald Schlabach, with a response by the Catholic theologian Joseph Capizzi. There is additional response from the Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver, and others.

The Bridgefolk Series is published by Pandora Press, whose director is Arnold Snyder. Both books are available on the Pandora website www.pandorapress.com.

Anne-Marie Visser

In Search of the Brother

A Bridgefolk member who had to miss this year's conference because she is recovering from cancer shares some reflections on her experience, written this spring when she was on retreat at the Benedictine monastery in Holland where she is an oblate.

The day before yesterday I met our neighborhood postman and I asked him if he would have a long weekend because of Queens Day on Friday. He nodded and returned the question: "How about you?" When I told him that I had to go to the clinic Saturday morning he looked concerned and answered: "I can bring you to the hospital if you like!"

I was flabbergasted. Not because he is Turkish and a devout Muslim—something I had known ever since he started talking to me after September 11th. He was clearly afraid that we would identify him with those "bad Arab guys". But I was stunned because he offered me to help on his day off.

As a married man he surely doesn't understand my single life as a woman, and he won't understand my job as a woman-minister. And for my part I don't understand his family life or his situation as a first generation immigrant. But he proves to be my brother because he sees my possible need and he is willing to help.

In these last months of personal crisis I have been dreaming about my maternal grandparents' house. It was the house that sheltered my mother and I when we arrived in the homeland after a stay in Indonesia for 3 years. Stability was unknown in our family which for generations was involved in trade both at home and overseas.

Brother- and sisterhood are always intentional. That may sound like a paradox, as brothers and sisters seem to be a given fact in our lives. But not for an only child, as I am of my mother—although never a lonely child, for from the beginning I was taken care of by a *babu* with some other children whose parents worked in the hospital. Children in the tropics are never left alone: they have bells around their ankles and everybody hears you come and go.

Once in Holland I lived for seven years with a foster-family that had three boys and a girl. I had to learn to adapt myself to a family, knowing that at ultimate moments I was not part of the family.

And only 15 years ago I found out that I had a half-brother and -sister from the first marriage of my father, whom I have never known. And it is a very emotional fact for all three of us that my unknown father probably is the transmitter of the cancer we all three suffer from as adults now. We seem to be part of the same 'conspiracy'.

You will not be surprised that for me ecumenism is linked up with this story of finding the way back home. Maybe as a Protestant, maybe as a contemplative, I cherish the lone conversation with God—as I am very keen on my individual conscience and convictions (which are not the same!)

When I was young I tried to keep God out of human affairs. People had made a mess of history—that was my early vision of man, as it was my grandfather's who had been in another war at the beginning of his century. My vision of God was ambiguous: God the Father, who I longed to trust was yet the Father (like the Mother) that I was very much afraid to lose again—or never to find.

Very slowly I realized in life, through aging, that God's will is the meaning of my being—that my life is meant to be, and yet God wants me to discover it while I am on my own feet. God is again and again asking my consent. Nothing is arranged behind my back. This is the first step and the last: to stand on my own feet and walk in God's sight.... and getting to solutions while walking *with no safeguard in advance*. There is always a risk.

But confidence and risk do not exclude each other. God's plan for me—unknown as it sometimes can be—is the basic trust of my celibate life. But the challenging part remains the place of the brother and sister in my life: not only my biological sister and brother, but the brother and sister in Christ. And the outcome is open.

And reconciling presupposes that we are capable of making our own decisions, that we have the courage to take the initiative. It presupposes the decision to behave as a trustworthy sister or brother, and to take into consideration what events in the ages past (that have been unknown to us) have done with us—or what we have spoiled ourselves voluntarily. God not only calls us, but keeps on guiding us. And God rarely rushes....

Self-righteousness, trying to justify ourselves, is something to beware of in finding back the brother

I am pretty sure that my longing and jealousy for Catholic brothers and sisters dates from the days when my grandparents lodged a Roman Catholic family which lost its own house during an air-raid bombing by the British in The Hague during World War II.

Those two distinct families for a while shared their family history—and gave each other mutual trust. They respected each other's way of life and convictions. And they never tried to convince each other. My grandmother once asked in secret if she could be taken to the parish church, for she was attracted by the mystery of it.

Some twenty odd years later as a student I visited the Benedictine monastery at Chevetogne with its orthodox liturgy. It was in the roaring Sixties and the sermon spoke of the utter autonomy of God the Father, who alone could guarantee our liberation. It showed me my lack of trust to give authority to a God who cares, a God who is concerned and yet a judge above it all, above us all.

I got the confidence to make a new decision in my life: to break off with the illusion that our society is the handiwork of man. It was a kind of conversion experience. And what followed was the way back to the brother, because there was space again—space for things to happen instead of being invented or manipulated by humans.

I owe it to the careful guidance of a Benedictine brother that I didn't convert to Catholicism, but instead found the way back to my own free-church tradition. And now—after another twenty years—I still need the confrontation with brothers and sisters to become aware of my own role in this life.

Obedience to one's own task—if it is God-given—can never exclude the brother, no matter if he is my friend or my enemy. The moments of utter reconciliation lie in His hands. So if I can lose the brother (or the father) humanly speaking, I can always find him back in God's time, his *kairos*.

We are God's handiwork—an *oikomene* (the whole living world) of God's making. We can only open our eyes and heart for it.

Anne-Marie Visser, who lives in Amsterdam, is a Mennonite pastor who cares for two congregations north of Haarlem. She is also an oblate of St. Adelbert Abbey in Egmond, a Benedictine monastery.

She participated in both the 2002 and 2003 Bridgefolk conferences, as well as the 2003 Marytrs Conference.

Her cancer treatments have been successful, and she is back at work at her congregation in Amsterdam. She is also seeking to form an ecumenical group in The Netherlands to discuss the international dialogue report.

These are excerpts from a longer essay available on the Bridgefolk website, www.Bridgefolk.net. Or [click here](#).

At this year's conference several participants were asked to write short 'haiku'—something that summed up a life experience. This is what Leslie James wrote:

June 6

*I turn,
bread in hand,
to find them leaning forward
in anticipation.*

*I hear the words—
familiar,
intimate,
holy—
being spoken in my voice.
I see the loaf break under the pressure of
my hands.*

*Celebration.
Mystery.
Remembrance.
The geographic crossroads of the already
and the not yet.*

*While the bread is passed,
I study their faces,
recall their stories,
lift them to God.*

"Eat, beloved, the Lord's body broken for you."

*With these words,
the YES,
resisted so long,
breaks free in my soul.*

*Yielding to grace,
the liminal becomes palpable.*

Pastor.

*Fundamentally changed,
I turn for the chalice.*

Leslie James is a student at the Great Plains campus of Assoc. Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and an intern at her home congregation in Wichita. This event occurred on Trinity Sunday 2004. She says of it, "I cannot say with certainty that I will be a pastor, but I am now able to say I am willing." She is shown here (at left) with Lois Kauffman at this year's Bridgefolk banquet.



John Thiesen

A Mennonite Catholic Family Story

A major reason from my interest in Bridgefolk is that I've been living on this familial bridge that's older than I am, and I would hope to better understand my experience and find out if there are others with similar long-term 'bridge' experiences.

My grandparents and my mother were Mennonite refugees from Crimea during the Russian Revolution. They fled to Germany, where my uncle was born, and then in 1926 emigrated to Chicago, and then to Newton, Kansas in 1936.

My story revolves around my Uncle Jake. The family was poor and my grandfather was an alcoholic, so Uncle Jake grew up at the bottom of the economic and social status hierarchy.

Uncle Jake ended up in the Army Air Force. I'm not sure whether he volunteered or was drafted. He was eventually posted to an island in the Pacific (from which the atomic bomb was launched to Hiroshima) as ground crew chief for a B-29.

Although Uncle Jake had been baptized at First Mennonite, Church in Newton his religious identity seems to have been fairly weak. On his Pacific island, he recounted, the only chaplain who reached out to the men, who came to them in sometimes hazardous settings, was the Catholic priest. This was the beginning of a longer process, about which I don't really know all the details, but sometime in the next few years he converted to Roman Catholicism.

He was married in 1950 and they had two children. My older cousin went through parochial schools in Wichita from kindergarten through a couple of years at the local Catholic college, Sacred Heart. My aunt was a graduate of Sacred Heart and was public relations and development director there.

When I was born in 1959, the relatives with whom I interacted the most were my uncle's family in Wichita. This means that I grew up well aware of a different format of doing religion. I would have gone to Mass an average of maybe 2 or 3 times a year with my cousins.

I thus grew up with this big gap in what otherwise would have been a sort of hermetically sealed Mennonite environment. (I found out a couple of years ago in a conversation with my cousin that the same was true for him. His Mennonite uncle and aunt provided a big hole in his pre-Vatican II Catholic world picture.)

In my home congregation it was legitimate to ask whether Catholics were "saved" and even to class Roman Catholicism among the "cults." These were alienating things to hear when Catholicism was part of my lived experience. I also heard quite a bit of open anti-Catholic bigotry, connected to racism against a significant Mexican population in town.

Living on a Mennonite-Catholic family boundary has made much of Catholic practice seem routine, distinctly un-exotic. The vocabulary of piety, the wide variety of forms the liturgy can take (from Latin to mariachi to suburban mega-church wannabe to stifflingly mundane going-through-the-motions to deeply moving funerals), the parochial school stories, the material culture—these are all familiar/familial. When my cousin's best friend grumbles, "It's going to take nine novenas to get this car fixed," I know exactly what he means and can laugh with him in his exaggerated frustration.

I understand, at least intellectually, the aesthetic attraction of the liturgy and spiritual practices of Catholicism for some Mennonites, and also the attraction of a tradition of peace-mindedness of the Mennonite world for Catholics. But living on a Mennonite-Catholic boundary has made me aware that lived reality in both worlds can take on a certain harshness, and also that it can have an old-shirt comfortableness that is something different than the more ideal attractions of either world.

From my personal theological or experiential "location" which is more centrally in the Mennonite world than the Catholic (as a denominational archivist, I'm one of the keepers of Mennonite collective memory, after all), I feel the value of ritual and liturgy in life, and find relatively little of it in Mennonite life, especially of any contemplative variety. I enjoy the sounds and rhythms of traditional religious language, while at the same time I want to avoid the doctrinal baggage that comes along with traditional language.

I intend to have it both ways: to take pleasure in the tradition while holding it lightly as the metaphor that it is, while also saying that there is something ineffable but real behind the metaphor. Maybe you would say that this is just going through the motions, but going through the motions is better than not having any motions to go through. And I don't believe that there is such a thing as *just* going through the motions.

John D. Thiesen is archivist and co-director of libraries at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, and webmaster of the Bridgefolk website.

This is a condensed version of a longer essay available on the Bridgefolk website, www.bridgefolk.net. Or [click here](#).

Bridgefolk People

News about people
involved in the
Bridgefolk Movement

Michael Joncas, Professor of Theology at the Univ. of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN and one of the leading Catholic church musicians in the U.S. was prevented from attending the entire Bridgefolk conference this summer because of illness. He now reports “my recovery from Guillain-Barre syndrome continues. I seem to have reached a plateau, in which my fingertips and feet from ankles to toe tips are still numb and tingling from nerve damage, and my gait is still a bit awkward—and I’m prey to waves of unpredictable fatigue. However the heart catherization went very well, and I’ll be back at Mayo Clinic for a heart checkup, which I expect to go well.” He adds, “If members of the Bridgefolk community would be willing to continue to pray for me, I have two requests: That I lose 100 pounds over the next two years as my doctors are directing; and that I get some clarity on the work God wants me to do now that he has spared me and restored me to health.”

Beverly Schmitt missed last summer’s conference because her 2½-year old grandson, Peter was undergoing surgery at Children’s Hospital in Atlanta to repair a condition caused by Hirschprung’s Disease. She says, “Thank you for your prayers throughout the conference in July, and those on-going. I so missed being with you but couldn’t have felt your presence more than during those days when you bridged our way to healing with your love and supplications.” Peter is recovering and according to his grandmother “displays all the delight and exuberance of a soon to be three-year old.”

Pat Shaver is enrolled in a master’s program in spiritual direction at Seattle University. “I really enjoy the ecumenical environment there,” she says, “but have been the only Mennonite. Thus I was very pleased to get to take a two-week intensive class on Christian ritual at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, taught by Marlene Kropf, which began the day after Bridgefolk this summer.” She is part-time office manager of a United Church of Christ congregation, and mom to two active teenagers.

Mary Ann Hoffman is moving to Owingsville, KY where she will be Pastoral Associate at St. Julie’s Church, a small Catholic mission in Appalachia.

Regina Wilson, Bridgefolk board member, returned from her sabbatical in Bolivia in mid-August. She says, “The time I spent there was more than I hoped it would be. I learned a lot of Spanish, got to know many Bolivians, and encountered a world very different from my own.” She lived with a couple who own a small store and shared in the life of the people of Bolivia, the poorest country in South America. “I have returned with more gratitude for life,” she says. “I saw that even when we fail our sisters and brothers or when we struggle to survive in this world, God is present, constantly pouring life into discouraging situations. And for that I say, ‘Gracias a Dios’.”

Abbot John Klassen of Saint John’s has made two trips to Rome this year. The first was with a group that presented a facsimile of the Saint John’s hand illuminated Bible to Pope John Paul in May. The second was this fall, when 230 Benedictine abbots from around the world met at the Benedictine headquarters in Rome for a congress that is held every four years. There are 438 Benedictine monasteries in the world. This year’s congress focused on the topic of globalization. “We want to look beyond the walls of our monasteries,” said the international head of the Benedictines. “Let’s allow ourselves to be challenged by globalization. It challenges our spiritual potential.”

Bridgefolk In Print

Items published
by Bridgefolk people
or about Bridgefolk

When you see
something in print that
would interest
other Bridgefolk,
please
pass it on!

We won't know
otherwise.

Interchurch Families, an international lay organization of families with chapters in several European countries, Australia, Canada and the U.S. reported on Bridgefolk in both of the last two issues of their newsletter. They have also added the stories about **Abbey and George Dupuy** and **Sarah and Phil Brubaker** from the last issue of *The Bridge* to their website. There are several other Mennonite Catholic family stories included on the Interchurch Families website, www.interchurchfamilies.org. They have recently held two international gatherings, one in England and one in Rome. A third is planned for Australia next year.

Robert Rhodes, Assistant Editor of *Mennonite Weekly Review*, wrote a series of three stories about the Bridgefolk conference this summer. *Mennonite Weekly Review* is a nationally distributed inter-Mennonite publication.

The front page story in the Aug. 23 issue is headlined “*Oblates find spiritual home in ancient ways: Monastic traditions of prayer and solitude bring pastors closer to God,*” and features two Mennonite pastors, **Weldon Nisly** and **Biff Weidman** who are long-time Bridgefolk participants and Benedictine oblates. The other two stories are on page 6. The first is headlined “*Mennonites changed Trappist abbot’s outlook on peace,*” and tells how **Abbot Eoin de Baldrathe** of Ireland came to share the Mennonite views on warfare. The second is headlined “*Dialogue reflects liturgical revival,*” and reports on the struggle over Mennonites sharing in a Catholic eucharist.

The lead story in the Aug. 16 issue reported on the martyrs conference held in conjunction with Bridgefolk this summer. It is entitled “*Right Remembering: Forgiveness of persecution is focus of martyr conference with Catholics.*”

This issue also includes an editorial by Robert Rhodes entitled “*Exploring faith’s common ground.*” Referring to both Bridgefolk and the martyrs conference he says, “Both of these efforts, which will be ongoing, can do much to clarify our shared past, a history rife not only with persecution but great misunderstanding, with repentance to be made on both sides. The time for such a dialogue clearly has arrived.”

All four stories and the editorial, as well as a collection of photos from Saint John’s, are available online. [Click here](#).

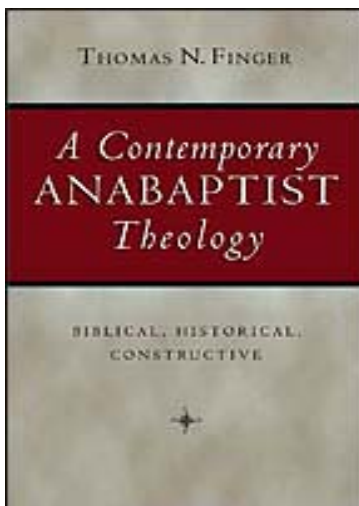
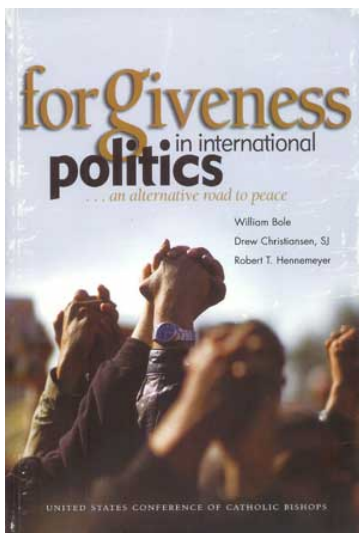
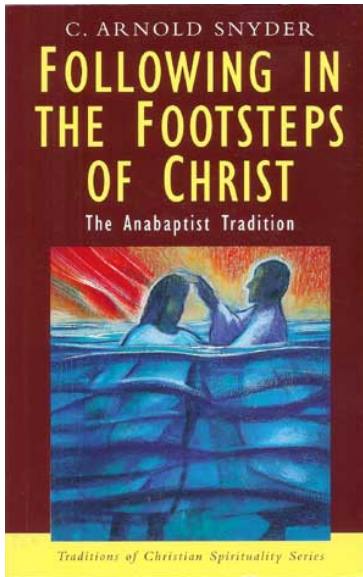
The Mennonite, official denominational publication of the Mennonite Church USA, included contributions by three Bridgefolk participants in its Sept. 21, 2004 issue.

Tom Finger, well-known Mennonite theologian, wrote the lead article “*Are Mennonites Sacramental?*” He answers by saying, “Any activity involving our bodies, especially those acts that Jesus commanded, can also be or become sacramental. In this sense, Mennonites have always been supremely sacramental. For we have insisted that God’s grace must be embodied, must become actual and concrete, in all aspects of daily life.”

In her regular column **Marlene Kropf**, director of the Mennonite Church USA Office of Congregational Life and Bridgefolk co-chair, reports on her recent sabbatical, part of which she spent in retreat with a community of Benedictine sisters. She says, “I observed a spirit of wholeness and peace that could not be denied. I heard the Spirit inviting me to become more Benedictine in my work life.”

In an editorial, *Mennonite* editor Everett Thomas refers to a conversation with **Ivan Kauffman** some years ago concerning the importance of the eucharist. “Since that time I have experienced Communion differently,” he says.

The entire issue is available online. [Click here](#).



Arnold Snyder's important new study of Anabaptist spirituality was published recently by one of the leading Catholic publishers, Orbis Books, as the 18th volume in their Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series. Snyder is professor of history at Conrad Grebel University College, Univ. of Waterloo, Canada, the managing editor of Pandora Press, one of the early participants in Bridgefolk, and one of the founders of the Martyrs Conference.

The jacket copy says, "Anabaptist spirituality has been described as 'both Catholic and Protestant,' a sixteenth-century ascetic lay reform movement inspired both by currents of pre-Reformation devotion to Christ, and the Reformation call to return to Scripture. Because of their insistence on adult baptism, Anabaptists—often illiterate artisans and peasants with no formal theological education—met widespread persecution. Arnold Snyder's sympathetic study draws on court records to give an intimate glimpse into their beliefs, practices, and spirituality."

Mennonite scholar and leader John A. Lapp says, "Snyder's insight and judgment reflect decades of research and the wisdom of a mature scholar. Readers will find their understanding extended and their spirits renewed. Snyder presents Anabaptism with a new level of attractiveness and coherence."

Drew Christiansen is a co-author of a new book published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops entitled *Forgiveness in International Politics: An Alternative Road to Peace*. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, DC says in his introduction, "This publication, which reflects years of dialogue among theorists and practitioners of conflict resolution, brings forgiveness into the broad context of international politics. Its aim is to present a strong concept of forgiveness that has value as a mean of conflict resolution."

The book draws on three case studies—Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the truth commissions in South Africa, and includes chapters on "Understanding Forgiveness in Politics," Political Forgiveness," and "Religious Intervention: The 'Outsider-Neutral' Parties."

Christiansen is a member of the International Mennonite Catholic Dialogue, whose report was published a few months ago. He is a counselor in international affairs to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and associate editor of *America* magazine. He has been an active participant in the Bridgefolk conferences at Saint John's from their beginning.

Tom Finger is the author of a new book, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, scheduled to be published in December by InterVarsity Press. A work of serious systematic theology, Finger takes on the formidable task of making explicit the often implicit theology of the Anabaptist movement, and then presents his own contemporary construction of that theology.

"In the constructive portions I dialogue with several contemporary theologians," says Finger. "In discussing personal salvation I chose the Vatican-Lutheran World Federation document, 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification'. On baptism I dialogue with the 'mature adulthood' school, especially Aidan Kavanagh (a Catholic theologian). On the Lord's Supper I dialogue with recent Catholic views, such as 'transignification'. On economic sharing I dialogue with Latin American Catholic liberation theologians. On the Trinity I dialogue with Elizabeth A. Johnson. These are the points where contemporary Catholic theology gets particular attention, although Catholicism is a major dialogue partner throughout."

Finger is a leading Mennonite theologian and a long-time participant in the Bridgefolk process.

Bridgefollk Mail

To explain how I became interested in Bridgefolk I need to explain that I am a Roman Catholic who taught secular history and current affairs in a Northern Ireland Catholic High School for 28 years.

My teacher's mind had often to dwell on the appalling violence of human history, including that of Northern Ireland itself. This began in 1969, and was still ongoing in 1994. Two distinct political traditions, divided also by religious affiliation, struggled for dominance in this small space.

In 1994 I was processing a lot of data on the issues I was teaching about—such as violence, environmental decay, and indifference to the poverty of the third world. I suddenly began to discern a pattern in the human behaviors that caused these problems: our tendency to 'climb'.

By 'climb' I mean the human tendency to seek fulfillment in the approval, or even adulation, of others. We tend to measure success in terms of what others think of us, and so seek status, power, wealth and possessions. We also hoard these things—and this is the basic source of inequality, injustice and violence.

Almost simultaneously I realized that it was an entirely different kind of journey that had always drawn me to the Gospels—the 'downward' journey of Jesus of Nazareth. I began to discern the historical mistakes of my own church in associating with worldly power structures—most conspicuously in accepting the story of Constantine that he had been told by God to conquer under the standard of the cross, and in then uniting the power of the church with that of the state.

One night I wondered if Jesus had accepted crucifixion to avoid imposing himself by force—the only alternative. In that moment I became seized by the conviction that this was indeed the case—and this became central to all my writing.

I retired from teaching in 1996, and took to full-time study and writing. In 1999 I published the book *Scattering the Proud* (Columba Press, Dublin), a reflection on the history and current relevance of Christianity.

One of those who read my book was Richard Lebrun, emeritus professor of history at the University of Manitoba, Canada [a Catholic Bridgefolk participant]. He told me that my ideas echoed themes in the Mennonite tradition, about which I then knew little. This was one link to Bridgefolk. Another was a recent mention of Mennonite spirituality on the *Vatican2* internet mailing list. At that point I googled "Mennonites"—and here I am.

I note that some Mennonites have visited Northern Ireland in connection with bridge-building, and that the Quaker tradition is not far distant from the Mennonite tradition. I am more than delighted to have arrived at a bridge to another Christian tradition that has always supported the principle of a separation between church and state—dissociating God from political power, the power of the world.

More strangely still, I have recently finished a novel for children that centers on the idea of building bridges. Its main characters call themselves "the bridgers" and begin to discern that this is what the Gospels are all about. As they are based in our second city, Derry, they will necessarily tackle the task of building bridges across the community divide here at some stage (a sequel is at the early planning stage).

One of our Celtic stories refers to "the music of what happens". For me this is the ever-mysterious way in which God draws us all towards himself, despite our waywardness. In finding Bridgefolk I know I am also finding my way home.

Sean O'Conaill
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I was raised a devout Catholic, but as a teen became more closely associated with Mennonites through the local MYF (Mennonite Youth Fellowship).

I married a Mennonite, graduated from Eastern Mennonite College (now Eastern Mennonite University) in Harrisonburg, VA, and was ordained in the Allegheny Conference.

After some years, however, my hunger for a more sacramental approach to ministry and life found me back in the Catholic Church.

For the past twelve years I have served as director of the Peace and Social Justice Ministry for the Catholic Diocese of Joliet in Illinois (<http://www.paxjoliet.org>).

This position has allowed me to be who I am, I guess—a Mennonite Catholic. I continue to have some interaction with Mennonites, mostly through the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center—and of course with old and dear friends.

I would appreciate hearing from you. I wish we had known about your recent conference. My wife and I would have made the trip north. I trust it was a time of blessing for all.

Tom Garlitz
Peace and Social Justice Ministry
402 S. Independence Blvd.
Romeoville, IL 60446
peace@dioceseofjoliet.org

I recently re-located an article called “Interchurch Families as a Threat of Resurrection” by George Kilcourse. It was published in *Mid-Stream* April 1995. Margaret O’Gara had assigned it as reading in one of her courses when I was a student at Toronto.

At the time I really did not like the article, but as I was working through it again after Bridgefolk ‘04 I noted the author’s emphasis on the value of “the success of *conscientious* interchurch families,” particularly where one spouse is Catholic, as pointing a way forward in ecumenism.

He saw interchurch families as valuable to ecumenism because such families wrestle daily a variety of praxis issues such as inter-communion, eucharistic sharing, etc. I think this article would be a good discussion piece for Bridgefolk via the newsletter, or a panel discussion at our next meeting.

*Susan Kennel Harrison
Toronto*

Can it be two weeks already since that spirit-filled gathering at Saint John’s? Those days with the Bridgefolk were truly grace-filled. It shows what can happen when people are willing to dare to reach out.

Soon after returning from the meeting I ran off a copy of the international dialogue report *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*. I’m now in the section on “Mennonite Perspectives on Peace” and find it powerful.

How any Christian church can be other than a peace church is a mystery to me. I look forward to the day when the Catholic Church will debunk the just war theory.

Several times a year the core committee of Benedictines for Peace has a conference call, and the next one is scheduled for this August. I will tell them of the meeting, and encourage them to attend next year’s gathering. The five of us are scattered around the country—Virginia, Kansas, Florida, Idaho, and Arkansas—each from a different Benedictine community. I’ve told them already about Bridgefolk, now I’ll invite them to ‘come and see’.

*Sr. Rosalie Ruesewald, OSB
St. Scholastica Monastery
Fort Smith, AR*

I just want to express my thanks to everyone who made this summer’s conference possible. Once again Bridgefolk was one of the finest experiences of unity and fellowship in Christ’s Body that I’ve had in recent years.

*Tom Finger
Evanston, IL*

I wanted to thank the steering committee for the wonderful conference that you hosted this past weekend. It is most impressive how this group holds their mission with such respect.

*Kathleen M. Theisen
St. Cloud, MN*

Thank you for raising this anguished matter [*Bridgefolk Brief: The Challenge of Being a Pro-Life Progressive*].

We had a discussion of the seamless garment approach at the recent Mennonite Inter-Church Relations Committee in response to reports of the political captivity of moral analysis of key issues in the current partisan climate.

Several people, including myself, proposed that the seamless garment approach might ease the polarization because it stands in judgment on elements of right and left wing positions, and breaks out of conventional political categories.

This led to comments. One was whether the only consistent life ethic is an absolute ban on abortion, or whether there is integrity in allowing for exceptions. Another was the fear that people would attach other favorite arguments—like Iraq, same sex marriage, etc.—and re-polarize the discussion.

In my judgment, peace oriented Catholics have something valuable to offer Mennonites here.

*John Rempel
Assoc. Mennonite Biblical Seminary
Elkhart, IN*

I resonated with that [same] article. I find voting to be a very difficult thing. I usually find myself to be voting for the lesser of two evils, and I sometimes get that wrong.

*Jay Freel Landry
Little Flower Catholic Church
South Bend, IN*

What You Can Do . . .

Next year’s conference will focus on dialogue at the local level.

Get ready by engaging someone in your area in dialogue.

It doesn’t have to be anything grand. Just a personal relationship is valuable, especially when it continues over a period of time.

EDITORIAL

Where Is the Bridge Going?

Reflecting on the purpose and future of Bridgefolk as we drove to the airport after last summer's conference, Ken Nafziger offered me a new way of understanding our call. He observed that what Bridgefolk are doing is creating a bridge to a new location none of us has yet inhabited.

The image of a bridge, however, seems to suggest that one can cross from one side to another. What is becoming clearer as we meet and share our stories is that one cannot really leave one's home and make a new home; in fact, most who attend the Bridgefolk gatherings are not seeking to do so. Yet we are intensely committed to these joint conversations—in the persistent hope that something new will one day be possible. As we worship, fellowship and challenge one another, we are creating a bridge to a new destination—a place where the divisions of the past will be healed and where a new expression of the body of Christ can become visible. We do not have to know how or when this will happen; we only need to be faithful to the call to begin building.

If I needed more affirmation of that call, it came in a retreat I led recently on “the spirituality of Mennonite singing,” in which a number of retired Catholic sisters as well as pastors and others from the nearby community participated. We had a rich time together exploring what happens when Mennonites sing, singing together, and sharing our faith. The participants, particularly the sisters, asked a great many questions about Mennonites, and were astonished to learn about Bridgefolk. One of them asked incredulously, “What would Catholics and Mennonites talk about together for three days?”

At the end of the day in our reflection circle, an elderly sister said, “What I got from this day is a question: Why aren't we together in the body of Christ? Mennonites and Catholics aren't really that different from each other. Wouldn't we be much more effective in the world if we all came together?”

I believe I heard Jesus speaking his dream through her.

— Marlene Kropf

For more information
visit our website
www.Bridgefolk.net

Save the date !

Next summer's
Bridgefolk
Conference

July 21-24
2005

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