

Press Release: For the First Time, Bridgefolk Gathers on the West Coast

By Marilyn Stahl for Bridgefolk

The 16th annual Bridgefolk Conference on the theme, *Pilgrimage Toward Christian Unity: Beginning with Baptism*, was held in Seattle, July 27-30. It marked the first time ever that this grassroots conversation between Mennonites and Catholics has taken place on the west coast. Hosted by area Mennonites, conference participants gathered on the campus of Seattle University. Sixty persons—thirty-five Mennonites, twenty-one Catholics, and four others—participated in the conference.

The conference's focus on baptism and formation for Christian unity built on the nearly completed international "Trilateral" conversation on baptism among the Mennonite World Conference, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

In the opening address, Professor Maxwell Johnson of the University of Notre Dame urged conference participants to recover an ecumenical baptismal spirituality. "Through water and the Spirit in baptism all are incorporated into the *one* Christ, the *one* Church, the *one* Body of Christ. And because of this, Christian unity is, above all, not a demand, not a call, but already a gift of baptism itself to be received and further realized gratefully." Johnson noted the enticing idea, which congregations in Seattle have considered seriously, of a common font for baptisms in a local community.



Maxwell Johnson gives the opening address. (Photo by Julien Hammond, used by permission)

At each conference, Bridgefolk seeks to highlight places and communities where the Spirit has already been at work breaking down dividing walls. James Eblen, professor emeritus at the School of Theology & Ministry (STM) at Seattle University, shared the STM story. After Vatican II, local church leaders sought ways to create new structures that would model more fully and visibly our baptismal unity in Christ. STM is an intentionally ecumenical graduate school of theology and ministry located at a Jesuit university. The inscription around the baptismal font in the Chapel of St. Ignatius reads: “No barrier can divide where life unites: one faith, one fount, one spirit, makes one people.”

In response, Weldon Nisly, Seattle, WA, and Marlene Kropf, Port Townsend, WA, affirmed the Mennonite partnership with STM. Jessica Wright, interim pastor of Evergreen Mennonite Church, Kirkland, WA, shared her experiences as a Mennonite student at STM. Mennonite students at STM embrace both their Anabaptist heritage and their identity as belonging in the larger Body of Christ.

At the Saturday morning session, conference participants explored draft documents from the Trilateral conversations on baptism. We were delighted that John Rempel, Senior Fellow at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre and a Mennonite participant in the international conversations, was able to be with us. He highlighted the centrality of baptism in the Anabaptist reform. “At the heart of its corrective was a focus on the human response of faith to the divine initiative of grace.”

Rempel invited input and comments on the drafts in hopes that the final report will benefit from grassroots ecumenical insights. Professor Anne McGowan of the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL, and Professor Johnson also contributed to the panel discussion on baptism.



Panel discussion on Trilateral conversation on baptism between Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics. (Photo by Julien Hammond, used by permission)

In addition to highlighting ecumenical scholarship, Bridgefolk conferences always move through the weekend with prayer, worship and singing, and the sharing of personal stories. Prayer experiences included monastic Midday Prayer and Muriel Bechtel, Kitchener, Ontario, led centering prayer.

Lectio divina, the Benedictine practice of scriptural reading, framed the Friday afternoon session. Conference participants reflected on 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

Building on that theme, Lenae Nofziger of Seattle Mennonite Church and Holy Family parish in Kirkland, WA, shared the joys and challenges of being part of a Mennonite-Catholic family. Gerald Schlabach, St. Paul, MN, spoke on baptism and the immigration status of Christians.

Spiritual directors Lynn Baker, Fresno, CA, Laura Funk, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Pat Shaver, Seattle, WA, offered spiritual direction to conference participants.

For many participants, the annual hymn sing and the Footwashing Liturgy and Agape Meal are conference highlights. This year, Randall Spaulding of Wallingford, CT, led the hymn sing in the beautiful Chapel of St. Ignatius on the SU campus. Tony Brown, Pittsburgh, PA, contributed a call and response song, and Br. Aelred Senna and Mary Lehman Yoder, Goshen, IN, were solo voices during the sung Litany of Witnesses, which includes the names of both Mennonites and Catholics who are part of the communion of saints.



Samantha Lioi of East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church, Lancaster, PA, presided at this year’s Footwashing Liturgy. STM director of worship, Bishop Edward Donalson, III, preached, sharing his mother’s lesson on the importance of extending the table.

The Footwashing Liturgy and Agape Meal are the core rituals of the Bridgefolk gathering. (Photo by Julien Hammond, used by permission)

After the Agape Meal, we paused to remember the late Professor Alan Kreider of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Nozomu Yamada, of Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan, described the first time he met Alan and Eleanor at the Anabaptist Center in Tokyo, and how Alan helped him tell his family's story of the miraculous healing of his brother, Jun, after intercessory prayers of both Catholics and Mennonites. In open sharing facilitated by Darrin Snyder Belousek, Lima, OH, many other participants described how Alan had touched their lives.

An ecumenical pilgrimage on Saturday afternoon, led by Marlene and Stanley Kropf and Dirk Giseburt of the Seattle planning committee, gave conference participants an opportunity to visit local Mennonite and Catholic places of worship and see for themselves a little of what is happening "on the ground" in Seattle. At Seattle Mennonite Church, lead pastor Megan M. Ramer welcomed pilgrims and led a series of stories about local ministries. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to walk the labyrinth in the sanctuary and visit "God's Lil' Acre," a drop-in center for people experiencing homelessness. At the second site, STM alum Brenda Bellamy, director of faith formation at Saint James Cathedral, welcomed pilgrims to the Cathedral and led a tour describing the Cathedral's history and symbolism. Participants also had the opportunity to attend the Vigil Mass.



Conference participants gather around the baptismal font of St. James Cathedral. (Photo by Samantha Lioi, used by permission)

The conference concluded on Sunday morning with a Mennonite-led worship service in the Ecumenical Chapel, using the same lectionary texts as had been read at Mass the day before and including a renewal of baptismal promises. Marilyn Stahl, Mennonite liturgical chaplain at STM, led the worship service with Marlene Kropf. Abbot John Klassen of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN, preached.

A sampling of the expressions of gratitude for the 2017 Bridgefolk Conference:

- *Dr. Johnson was an excellent presenter for this conference. His scholarship on this subject is truly remarkable and his affable presentation style made this session a highlight for me.*
- *I thought [the STM story] was important because it really is the backstory for many graduates of STM and why the ecumenical impulse is so strong here.*
- *I liked the integration of Lectio throughout the [Friday afternoon] session. And I enjoyed the more personal reflections . . .*
- *In general, the prayer experiences at this conference have been powerful and extremely well-prepared. Thank you for this gift!*
- *The Footwashing and Agape Meal were, as always – a highlight.*
- *The panel on baptism was a very stimulating discussion!*
- *Randall is a remarkable musician and song leader. I was captivated by every aspect of the hymn sing event. It was an emotional moment for me in the context of this conference.*
- *The Sunday morning worship was the most wonderfully integrated closing liturgy we have done! Awesome.*
- *Uplifting, hopeful, deeply deeply encouraging. Thank you!*

The 17th annual Bridgefolk Conference will convene 26-29 July 2018 at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN.