

“Toward a Just Peace: Eradicating the Evil of Racism”

St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota

July 26-29, 2018

Each year, sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman Catholics come together to celebrate each other's traditions, explore each other's practices, and honor each other's contribution to the mission of Christ's Church. The 17th annual Bridgefolk Conference, “Toward a Just Peace: Eradicating the Evil of Racism,” was the first in a series of conferences that will focus on Just Peace.

The phrase “Just Peace” offers an important new framework for both Catholics and Mennonites. For centuries, Catholics relied on Just War criteria to determine whether participation in a particular war was permissible. In April 2016, Pax Christi International organized a conference in Rome on [Nonviolence and Just Peace](#). This exciting initiative seeks to affirm “the vision and practice of active nonviolence at the heart of the Catholic Church.” “Just Peace” challenges Mennonites, who come from a tradition that includes nonresistance, to confront structures of evil and oppression boldly and nonviolently.

At the opening session of the conference, Gerald Schlabach, professor of theology at Saint Thomas University in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and one of the founders of Bridgefolk, situated the theme of this year’s conference in the work on Just Peace. During the second session, participants viewed [I Am Not Your Negro](#), a documentary on the life and thought of James Baldwin that traced the murders of civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. The film incorporated scenes of more recent acts of violence against African Americans to offer a sobering reminder of how far we have to go to realize the dream of racial justice and equality in this country. “Not everything that is faced can be changed,” Baldwin says, “but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Anne McCarthy, a Benedictine sister from Erie, Pennsylvania, gave the Catholic keynote address, “Overturning Temple Tables: Toward Repairing a Racist Legacy.” Sister Anne coordinates Erie



Benedictines for Peace and is on staff with [Benetvision](#) and [Monasteries of the Heart](#). She shared recent survey results that found Erie to be the worst place in the United States to be black, in view of measurable, structural inequalities in numerous indicators of economic and social quality of life. There are three million black Catholics in the United States, yet Catholic teaching on racism often lacks a sustained social analysis or an in-depth theological or ethical reflection on racism as contrary to the Gospel. Significantly, American Catholic social teaching on race suffers from a lack of passion. In forming these critical observations, Sister Anne drew on Bryan Massingale’s book, [Racial Justice and the Catholic Church](#). Moving in the direction

of justice will require truth-telling that acknowledges the harm, lets in the pain, apologizes, and repents. Repairing a racist legacy will also require affirmative redress to heal the psychic wounds, material harms, and economic disadvantages that people of color experience.

Felipe Hinojosa, [history professor at Texas A&M University](#) and author of [Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith & Evangelical Culture](#), was the keynote Mennonite speaker. He shared the story of how a law student named Ricardo Cruz organized a group of Chicano Catholics and others



in Los Angeles in 1969. The group, [Católicos por La Raza](#), called on the Catholic Church to be an instrument of social change and to use its institutional power and wealth to help the poor. After repeated unsuccessful attempts to voice their concerns to Archbishop James Francis McIntyre about how much money was being spent on buildings and how little on ministry to the poor people of the archdiocese, the group decided to disrupt the Christmas Eve Mass at the recently constructed St. Basil's Church in downtown Los Angeles. This story triggered a focus through the rest of the conference on disruption of unjust power relationships and the personal and structural defensiveness of white Christians in the face of disruption.

Singing and praying together is an important feature of every Bridgefolk conference. Sarah Johnson and Carl Bear, a husband-wife team from Toronto, Ontario, led morning worship at the conference. Sarah is the worship resources editor for the new Mennonite hymnal, [Voices Together](#); Carl is Director of Music Ministry at St. Giles Kingsway Presbyterian Church in Toronto. Acknowledging that they are people of European background at a conference on racism, Sarah and Carl intentionally chose songs and readings from marginalized peoples and individuals and organized times for prayer around the themes of lament, struggle, and hope.

André Heywood, a native of Trinidad who grew up in London, Ontario, and is currently music director and conductor of the Saint John's Boys' Choir and the All-College Choir of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, led a hymn sing on Friday evening. His solo in the gospel song *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* was a highlight of the evening.

As has been the case for many years, the shared Christian identity of Catholics and Mennonites was celebrated in worship through a foot washing service and agape meal held on Saturday. The liturgy, which has been used in previous conferences, was prepared by Abbot John Klassen and Mary Schertz, professor emerita at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

The conference closed on Sunday morning with an integrated time of worship and reflection on the conference theme. An overarching question for conference participants was how Bridgefolk itself is called to change and to promote change, bearing in mind the options framed for us of the outsider's prophetic call and pressuring for change while working within existing structures and institutions. How is God inviting Bridgefolk to confront and disrupt the evil of racism?

Next year's conference will be held July 25-28, 2019, at [Canadian Mennonite University](#) in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The focus will continue to be on Just Peace, and this conference will highlight church and social relationships with First Nations peoples.