

Report on Annual Gathering 2016
Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship
July 2016



Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship (MHF) held its **Annual Gathering 2016**, June 17-19, 2016 at the YMCA of the Rockies, Estes Park, Colorado. This is the first time in MHF's five-year history that the Annual Gathering was held west of Indiana. Approximately 63 persons, including presenters and resource persons, were in attendance.

Setting. The YMCA of the Rockies Estes Park Center was a beautiful setting for Annual Gathering. The facilities of the Emerald Mountain Lodge provided both comfortable sleeping rooms as well as meeting rooms for both plenary sessions and workshops. Meals were served in one of the many common dining rooms on the grounds.



Worship and Plenary Sessions. Four plenary sessions anchored the weekend program. Each session began with worship, led by **Lauren and Kim Martin** from New Castle, Colorado, who reflected on various aspects of the theme, "Wholeness and Holiness: Views from the Mountaintop." **Kaleem Kheshgi** from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was a versatile musician and song leader.

Friday evening. After an evening meal, the opening session featured a presentation by Nancy Trottner, a nurse, psychotherapist, and spiritual director from Longmont, Colorado. Her presentation, entitled "Spirituality of Illness: Exploring the Invitation to Go Deeper," offered a perspective on how times of serious and chronic illness can be both challenging and at the same time offer opportunities for spiritual growth. A time of fellowship and networking followed the presentation.

Saturday morning. The plenary session on Saturday morning, entitled "**Widening our views: The role of MHF,**" was led by the MHF Board who presented the results of a six-month "Conversations Initiative" and strategic planning process for MHF. Executive Director, Paul Leichty, gave some historical perspective on how Mennonite Medical Association (MMA) and Mennonite Nurses Association (MNA) came together to form Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship and how the process has gone in the first five years. Board President, Beth Good, shared a brief summary of the strategic plan which involves consolidating assets for renewed mission, living into present trends, and working in partnership with other organizations toward common goals. Laura Yoder, Board Vice-President, then introduced the Conversations Initiative process which participants engaged in table groups. The Board's slide presentation is [online](#).

Workshops. Workshops were plentiful at Annual Gathering 2016 with each workshop offered only once. Following is a short summary of the workshops:

- **End of Life Care: The Ethical Issues.** Melvin Stjernholm, a physician from Colorado, moderated a panel which included nurses Lisa Allison, from Colorado, and Rachel Neufeld, from British Columbia. Panelists discussed issues related to end-of-life care from their professional and personal perspectives.
- **Stories from MVS: volunteerism, privilege, and community health.** Hilary Garmen and Stephen Graber, Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) volunteers, shared how volunteering in healthcare has influenced their perceptions of community health needs.
- **Dreams: Listening to our inner teacher.** Nancy Trottner, nurse and spiritual counselor, gave participants some insights into how nightly dreams can provide guidance, direction, affirmation, and challenge in their spiritual journeys.
- **Views from the Mountaintop.** Glenda Kauffman served as moderator for a group of persons who reflected on their various experiences in international healthcare settings. Ernest Kandel, a Colorado physician, shared about a variety of experiences including a more recent experience with Doctors Without Borders. Sonia Graber, a nurse practitioner also from Colorado, also served with Doctors Without Borders as a part of the response to the Ebola crisis. British Columbia physician, Murray Nickel, shared about his community development coaching alongside of grassroots practitioners in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- **Life and Death: Our Divine Romance with God.** Kim Mooney, a Colorado thanatologist, presented her perspective on the human lifespan as being bounded by birth and death and consisting of life lived best by accepting God's plan for us, whether it becomes clear or remains shrouded in mystery.
- **Best Practice vs. Reality: Maintaining Holistic Care Abroad and at Home.** Rachel Neufeld, who has been a nurse in both North America and in developing countries, reflected on the concept of "best practice" and the adjustments needed to serve the whole person within the reality of the environment in which that person lives and works.
- **Stepping Out on a Limb: Exploring the Spirit of Healing.** Bud Wilson, a naturalist and environmental activist from Colorado led in outdoor experience encouraging "Nature's Embrace."
- **Death and Dying: Perspectives from Theology, Resilience and Family Systems.** Kenton Derstine, chaplain and professor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary gave a presentation on the impact of death and loss on individuals and family systems.

Saturday evening. The theme for the evening plenary session was “**Healing the Soul – Trauma, Violence, Reconciliation, Resilience.**” Two persons presented in a back and forth style about their own work in trauma and violence. Beth Good, from Columbia, Pennsylvania shared from her work as a nurse, Mennonite Central Committee Healthcare Programs administrator, and trauma researcher in West Africa. Melissa Roth, from Colorado Springs, Colorado, shared from the perspective of a Colorado-based ministry called RAWtools which educates local communities on gun violence and works at peacemaking by turning guns into garden implements. Beth shared briefly from a model for dealing with trauma developed by Eastern Mennonite University’s STAR program. The evening concluded with a hymnsing and more fellowship and snacks.



Sunday morning. Dr. Abraham Nussbaum, a psychiatrist and professor from Denver, Colorado, spoke on the theme, “**Tinkering in Today’s Healthcare Factories: Pursuing the Renewal of Medicine.**” He compared the state of today’s medicine to a modern restaurant chain with its computerized menu systems designed to create uniformity of entrees across all stores in the chain. Nussbaum advocated for a more customized patient-centered approach which he compared to each home’s usage of the “More with Less Cookbook.” Nussbaum also found this more patient-centered and community-centered approach in the work of Mennonites after World War II in setting up community mental health centers in various parts of the country. See the [handout](#) from Dr. Nussbaum’s presentation.

As a Catholic who has come to appreciate Mennonites, Nussbaum also made reference to the influence of John Howard Yoder’s book entitled *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*. This drew some response during the question and answer time and in informal conversations afterward. (See below for further comments.)

The Annual Gathering ended with a communion service. Worship leaders, Kim and Lauren Martin, also offered an anointing with oil for anyone who wished to participate. Worshipers gathered in a circle for a final sending hymn.

Participation. The goal of bringing in more participants from the Western states and provinces while still





providing an attractive location for travel from the East was partially accomplished. Of the approximately 63 persons in attendance, 18 persons came from Colorado; for all except one, it was the first time attending an Annual Gathering. Nine persons came from Kansas. Other Western states were not well-represented with only one person

each from Arizona and California, both workshop presenters. Two persons from Canada came, both from British Columbia and both workshop presenters. Eastern states represented were New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia as well as the District of Columbia. Great Lakes and Midwestern states included Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Minnesota.

Planning Committee. Congratulations and a tremendous “thank you” go to this year’s Planning Committee! A special word of gratitude goes to Indigo Miller, who so ably arose to the challenge of organizing and chairing the committee. Other members of the Planning Committee were Lisa Allison, Jan DeCourtney, Glenda Kauffman, Mel Stjernholm, and Erica Stoltzfus. They were assisted by Paul Leichty, Executive Director, and Deloris Rhodes, Administrative Assistant.

Massage Chair. A special feature of this year’s Annual Gathering was proposed and carried out by **Jan DeCourtney**, a massage therapist. She brought her massage chair on Saturday and Sunday and treated many participants to chair massages. Jan collected donations for her services for the benefit of Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship. Many thanks to Jan!

Nursing Continuing Education. A special thanks goes to two persons who made possible Continuing Education Units for nurses. **Linda Witmer** at Eastern Mennonite University in Lancaster, Pennsylvania did the paperwork to make these units possible and **Erica Stoltzfus** provided on-site coordination. Ten persons took advantage of these educational credits.

Sexual abuse and reference to scholarly work

During the final plenary presentation, Dr. Abraham Nussbaum, a Catholic psychiatrist from Denver, Colorado, referred to the influence of the thinking and scholarly work of John Howard Yoder. Concerns surfaced in the question and answer time as well as on one evaluation form about the reference to Yoder in light of Yoder's now known history of sexual abuse.

In response to these comments, the Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship Board of Directors wishes to convey to the MHF membership that it takes concerns about sexual abuse and sexual violence very seriously. In no way does MHF seek to justify the actions of John Howard Yoder or anyone else who has engaged in sexual abuse. A number of Board members have extensive experience as clinicians and scholars with the issue of sexual abuse and sexual violence. One of those persons referred to her work in the Saturday evening session of the same Annual Gathering.

We very much regret the pain caused by the mention of Yoder in Nussbaum's presentation. We realize that this brings to the surface deep wounds connected not only with the sexual abuse itself but with the inadequate response of Mennonite institutions over the course of decades which had the effect of protecting Yoder's scholarly reputation at the expense of scores of women abused by him.

Nussbaum explained in response to the person who commented in the session that he was aware of Yoder's history of sexual abuse, but that he did not feel like it was in his place as an outsider to refer to it to a Mennonite audience. Afterwards, a number of people engaged Nussbaum further on the topic of Yoder's history of sexual abuse. The MHF Board followed up with some further context and explanation to Dr. Nussbaum who expressed his gratitude for the further education.

In the last number of years, Mennonite Church USA and AMBS have attempted to acknowledge, apologize, lament, and bring additional healing to all those affected by Yoder's abuse. We join with many others in adding our voices to these lamentations and our efforts to build safe healing communities.

The issue regarding the ongoing use of Yoder's writings continues to be the source of some controversy. While some would seek to banish any reference to his writings, others take a more nuanced approach as expressed in a [statement by AMBS](#) in 2012.

As a result of this feedback, MHF intends to devote more time in future Annual Gatherings and possibly Regional Meetings to the issues of sexual abuse and trauma. We are also open to further feedback from anyone. This can be private feedback to the Board or as a public article to be published on the MHF website in the blog that is replacing the former quarterly publication of *Mennonite Health Journal*. Other formats will also be considered.

The Board appreciates the ongoing feedback from MHF's constituency as we continue the effort to integrate our Christian faith and our lives as healthcare professionals.



Offering. It is the custom of MHF to collect an offering at the final plenary session for the benefit of organizations or projects that have been featured at the Annual Gathering. This year's offering went to RAWtools located in Colorado Springs, Colorado. RAWtools describes its overarching purpose: "Disarm Hearts. Forge Peace." RAWtools partners with communities in an effort to repurpose weapons into hand tools

for productive lifelong purpose. More information is on a [flyer](#) included in the registration packet. A total of \$1453.00 is being set to RAWtools.

Children's Program. This year, for the first time, there were no children registered for the event. Finding Children's Program Coordinators has often been a challenging task and was even more challenging than usual this year. Thus, when no children were being registered, the Planning Committee and administration made the decision to cancel the Children's Program this year. We later discovered that in several cases children accompanied Annual Gathering participants who then made outside arrangements for their care on the YMCA grounds outside the structures of the Annual Gathering. Since MHF had a large group of children in Harrisburg in 2015, it is unclear whether there is a trend developing and whether the Gathering should be family-centered or whether MHF moves more to a professional conference model.

Final Notes. The MHF Board continues to evaluate the role of Gatherings as a part of the overall mission of Mennonite Healthcare Fellowship. Annual Gatherings have been carried on in the longstanding tradition of previous joint Conventions of Mennonite Medical Association and Mennonite Nurses Association. Since MHF's beginnings in 2011, all five MHF Gatherings have been well received and evaluation and feedback has been very positive. At the same time, each year has brought the challenge of attracting enough registrants so that a quality event can break even financially. It is increasingly the case that MHF is relying on special "cost sharing donations" in order to minimize any net loss from the event itself.

Next year, Annual Gathering will be held June 23-25, 2017, at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center, Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. At this point, the plan is to expect increased attendance from the last time it was at Laurelville (2014) and prepare for spouse attendance and a Children's Program.