

## **A Brief Introduction to Frazer Mennonite Church for Atlantic Coast Conference Delegates**

Words from the pen of an impassioned 22-year-old young adult named Christian Z. Mast must be credited with initially sparking interest in the new church plant that became Frazer Mennonite Church. Mast, a son of the Conestoga Amish-Mennonite Church in Morgantown, PA, wrote an article for the Mennonite weekly, *Gospel Witness* in 1907 pointing out that there was an abandoned Mennonite “chapel” in eastern Chester County and lamenting that an Amish-Mennonite witness was no longer present there. A newly-formed Mission Committee in the Weaverland Mennonite Church (Lancaster Conference) read Mast’s article and pursued starting a church there in 1908, sending preachers from the Lancaster and Franconia Conferences.

In the spring of 1910, the few local Mennonite families attending services at the “chapel” intentionally changed the meeting place to an old school house located on the Main Line in Frazer (Route #30) and named it Frazer Mennonite Church. These Mennonites were shop owners of small businesses in or near Frazer who wanted their church visible and accessible in the community rather than four miles northeast out in the country. This location change has shaped the rest of Frazer’s history.

From the beginning, Frazer welcomed and attracted local people from non-Mennonite and non-church backgrounds and incorporated them into the life of the church. In 1914, Bishop Benjamin Weaver received an Episcopalian immigrant from Holland, Christine Swanenburg, into membership at Frazer. One of the sons of this family, Mark Swanenburg, became Frazer’s first pastor when he was ordained in 1924.

One of Frazer’s most influential and innovative pastors, Milton Brackbill, was called to ministry and ordained in 1933, after growing up in Philadelphia. He, and his brother Harry Brackbill, freely invited to church all those they encountered through Harry’s road side fruit and vegetable stand and Milton’s overnight cottage/motel business, both located along Route #30. Milton expressed and nurtured a warm invitation to Frazer Mennonite Church using Numbers 10:29, “come thou with us and we will do thee good.” In the 1930s, Frazer drew many community people into the church through its Sunday School and Bible School. Milton implemented two kinds of membership at Frazer to make it possible for people to belong at Frazer before they could conform to conference standards. In 1936, there were 64 church members and 175 Sunday School members. He also implemented that S.S. members could participate and vote in congregational meetings. While Frazer no longer has two kinds of membership today, regular attenders are welcome to speak into congregational decisions.

In the 1960s and later, Frazer became a church for young Mennonite people moving to the greater Philadelphia area for higher education, IW service, medical professions and more. Throughout Frazer’s history, many gifted and dedicated people have come and gone. In more recent decades, we have attracted students from Eastern University, who are drawn to a peace church that is actively engaged in social justice ministries. Some of the young families in the congregation today, started attending as college students. Jason Kuniholm first came to Frazer in 1987 as an Eastern seminary student for a pastoral internship experience, and ended up serving as the lead pastor for 18 years until 2005. Recently, Jeff Lundblad, a Baptist student from Palmer Seminary, completed a two-year internship at Frazer.

Today Frazer Mennonite Church is a vibrant, suburban congregation comprised of 69 active households located from Philadelphia to Gap and from Pottstown to Kennett Square. Most, however, live within a 15 mile radius from the church. Thirty (30) of these households are individuals or families of non-Mennonite background. Another 17 households are couples where one grew up Mennonite and the other did not. The remaining 22 households come from Mennonite background. One-third of our congregation is single including those never married, widowed or divorced. We have an average worship attendance on Sunday mornings of 94 and an official membership of 125.

Frazer shares our building and land space to make a difference in our community. Our Ploughshares Community Garden offers garden plots to local families. Our soccer field is used by local teams and for take up games by local Hispanic young adults. Our church building is used throughout the week hosting three Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, an Overeaters Anonymous meeting and providing space for Chester County Intermediate Unit consultations for children with special education needs. We share our worship space with a Pentecostal Hispanic church that meets on Sunday afternoons. A local quilter's guild meets at Frazer once a month.

Since we celebrated our centennial year in 2010, we have been reclaiming and re-imagining Frazer's missional purpose here on the Main Line today. We are currently engaged in a community assessment process and deliberately discerning to what current needs of the Frazer community God is calling Frazer to respond. We truly desire for God's healing and hope to flow through our Frazer Mennonite community of faith to the world.

The diverse group of believers who gather at Frazer claims this common vision statement: "***Frazer Mennonite Church is a compassionate community walking with Christ toward peace and wholeness.***" Frazer believes that we can best extend God's compassion and grace through living out these three strengths of our congregation:

**Frazer is a welcoming place**...a place to feel accepted where you are and be encouraged to glimpse the possibilities of seeing yourself as God sees you--as a beloved creation being molded into the likeness of Christ.

**Frazer is a connecting place**...a place designed to connect you with God and others in ways that address your deepest needs and encourage maturity and growth in your relationships with God and others.

**Frazer is a healing place**...a place to experience God's love and the compassion of others to bring healing to the pain we carry.

On April 10, 2011, the Frazer congregation affirmed this current calling:  
**We believe that the Spirit of God is calling Frazer Mennonite Church to embody and give witness to practicing our unity in Jesus Christ in the midst of our diversity within the congregation, in our conference/denominational relationships, and in the world.**

This refers to practicing our unity in Jesus Christ in the midst of our diversity in numerous areas. We do not want to be defined only by one issue, but seek to continue to extend a welcome to anyone desiring to follow Christ and to grow in the context of the Frazer Mennonite family of faith. We both embrace and teach our *Mennonite Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and allow genuine discussion and discernment of matters of faith to continue. Following the Apostle Paul's counsel for congregations of Christian believers holding

differing convictions (Romans 14-15), we choose to “welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God” (15:7) and to “not despise” and “not pass judgment” on one another (14:3). We seek to practice mutual respect, humility and agreeing and disagreeing in love.

At the same April 2011 congregational meeting, the Frazer congregation took action to explore transferring our conference affiliation from the Lancaster Conference to another Mennonite Church USA conference. We articulated three primary reasons for changing our conference affiliation:

- 1) FMC desires affiliation in a conference that embraces the calling to practice our unity in Jesus Christ in the midst of diversity of belief and practice;**
- 2) FMC is solidly committed to being affiliated with Mennonite Church USA and desires to belong to a conference that shares this strong commitment; and**
- 3) FMC seeks affiliation in a conference in which representation and decision-making are more congregational and less hierarchal.**

The Frazer congregation was drawn first to consider affiliation with the Atlantic Coast Conference, since your conference was established on the principle of unity in diversity. In May 2011, we invited the ACC Executive Committee to meet with us to begin to get acquainted with your conference and to explore affiliation with you. Over time, Frazer discerned that ACC shared and embraced the values identified in our three criteria for a new conference affiliation. After a prayerful process of congregational discernment, Frazer took action of November 20, 2011 to transfer our membership to the Atlantic Coast Conference. *Thank you for prayerfully considering our request to belong to the Atlantic Coast Conference. We are eager to join with you in carrying out God’s mission in the world.*

#### **What Frazer Mennonite Church brings to the Atlantic Coast Conference**

- 1) a clear calling and sincere desire to practice unity in diversity along with you. We embrace the diversity of theology and practice that already exists in the ACC and Frazer desires to respectfully and humbly contribute to ongoing conversations with the diverse congregations that belong to ACC;
- 2) a solid commitment to Mennonite Church USA and a desire to work collaboratively with ACC congregations in expressing that commitment and in supporting our denomination;
- 3) a willingness to contribute time, talents, gifts and money to support the calling and the ministries of the Atlantic Coast Conference. Frazer has many gifted persons trained and experienced in numerous professions who could make a meaningful contribution to the work of the ACC. We are ready and willing to commit our fair share of financial support to ACC.
- 4) a partnership with our sister congregation in La Ceiba, Honduras, Iglesia Evangelica Menonita Central.
- 5) a commitment to Anabaptist-Mennonite faith in a rapidly changing, post-modern context.

For more information about Frazer, visit our website at [www.frazermennonite.org](http://www.frazermennonite.org) and read our centennial history book, *An Experiment in Grace: The Centennial History of Frazer Mennonite Church 1910-2010* written by Darvin L. Martin.

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