

Atlantic Coast Conference
CURRENTS

Winter 2023
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ACC churches conclude long, fruitful partnership with Argentina Mennonites

By Stephen Crane

The wise Teacher wrote, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (Ecc. 3:1). For four ACC congregations, there was a time and season to be in relationship with a group of congregations in Argentina. It was a time when our paths joined to journey together and walk alongside each other with the Lord.

The journey began in 2002 when Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) contacted ACC congregations to establish a ministry relationship with a group of churches in central Argentina. This led to an exploratory trip in February 2003 with representatives from MMN, Akron, Forest Hills, and Neffsville. They visited a group of congregations with the acronym VEMZO (Visión Evangelística Misionera Zona Oeste, Missionary Evangelistic Vision in the Western Zone).

In September of that same year, representatives from VEMZO participated in the annual ACC Vision Banquet and visited ACC congregations. Raul Garcia, leader of the Argentine Evangelical Mennonite Churches, spoke at the banquet. That visit resulted in a formal ministry agreement between the ACC congregations and VEMZO. It was important that the relationship was between spiritual equals in Christ, noting the economic differences between our contexts.

A notable exchange happened in July 2015. ACC churches invited VEMZO to participate together in the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Harrisburg. Many remember the visits from our fellow Argentine Christians in homes and churches before and following the assembly.

Through the years there were many visits between the Argentina and US congregations. The details of the partnership were updated, renewed and all were encouraged in ministry.

Mick Sommers and Michelle Stauffer Gehman in Argentina with VEMZO church members in February 2014.

Continued on page 2



Clockwise beginning at left: In a partnership meeting, Daniel Oyanguren explains the mission strategy of Visión Evangelística y Misionera de la Región Central (VEMCE, formerly known as VEMZO). Ramón Godoy and Javier Miguel are mission workers who coordinate the broader ministries. Sara Wiegner (Akron, Pennsylvania) and Stephen Crane (Ridgeview, Pennsylvania) represent partner churches in an Atlantic Coast Conference cluster of churches in partnership with VEMCE.

The last visit was made by Sara Wiegner and Steve Crane to visit congregations and participate in the 100th anniversary of the Argentine Mennonite Church in September 2019. During this visit VEMZO changed to VEMCE (Visión Evangelística

“The VEMZO partnership fostered connection and caring for all involved which pushed us out from our usual circles of life.”

Misionera Región Central, Evangelistic Missionary Vision of the Central Region).

Mick Sommers, then pastor of Ridgeview, was a part of the relationship to visit the Argentine churches and received them in PA.

Mick reflects on the relationship: “I cherish the relationships built and opportunities to share the similarities and uniquenesses of our lives from the times of being with our VEMZO partners. As a recipient of their wonderful hospitality and vibrant church life in Argentina and later a host for some during the 2015 MWC in Harrisburg, the sharing and unity which emerged will stay with me throughout my life. The VEMZO partnership fostered connection and caring for all involved which pushed us out from our usual circles of life. I am grateful to God for the interchange fostered.”

Our individual journeys have taken us in different directions. Following the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the church in Argentina, the pandemic ended visits and made communication difficult.

Argentina was hit especially hard, and communication dwindled as our ministry focus changed. Many of the people in the initial stages of the relationship have moved on to other things and the reality of our ACC congregations has changed. This culminated in an August 2022 communication that concluded our formal ACC relationship with VEMCE. It was a difficult decision, but we are thankful for the season we shared together.

Our time and season of journey together has been a meaningful time for all involved. May the Lord bless our journeys until we all gather together one day in eternity. Hymn 177 in The Mennonite Hymnal reminds us:

*When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!*



Currents is a quarterly publication that seeks to inspire and inform about ways God is working in congregations and related ministries of Atlantic Coast Conference of Mennonite Church USA.

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Blossom Hill Youth campout to highlight homelessness

By Jason Hess

On Friday night, November 18, 2022, which was the day of Lancaster County's Extraordinary Give, the Blossom Hill Mennonite Senior Youth participated in the annual campout event to benefit the local nonprofit Tenfold and their programs aimed at providing housing for the homeless and reducing the causes of homelessness.


The campout was held at Clipper Stadium, the home of Lancaster's minor league baseball team, the Barnstormers. About 15 members of the youth group participated along with four youth leaders.

Because of extremely cold temperatures and wind chills that night, all campers slept on the locker room floors, rather than outside in tents as they did the previous year.

Following the event's kickoff and some pizza, many of the youth participated in a cornhole tournament in the outfield. Although the competition was fierce, two of our youth, Yuji Wenger and Eli Lefever, held up the championship cup at the end of the tournament.

A local band known as the Dimestore Dolls made their second Tenfold Campout appearance that night, where they performed a mix of band originals and classics. Despite some technical difficulties in the beginning, the band was able to give an exciting performance that attracted the campers to the concourse to listen.

Sabrina Hess, a student of the lead singer, Kelly Buchanan, and a member of Blossom Hill Senior Youth Group, also surprised the crowd with a spellbinding rendition of "I Put a Spell on You" that she sang alongside the band.

The BHMC Senior Youth set up their own fundraising page for the event, which ended up raising nearly \$5,000. The prize for being the top fundraiser for Tenfold was a 5 lb. Hershey chocolate bar. 





Susan Gierschick, representing Ark Bible Chapel, shares a response to ACC delegates from her congregation.

ACC to process credentials for LGBTQ+ ministers

By ACC Staff

The Ministerial Leadership Committee (MLC) of Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) has affirmed its readiness to process credentialing requests for LGBTQ+ ministers.

The committee's decision comes after careful discernment of listening to God's Spirit through the diverse feedback from delegates and congregations and with affirmation of the Executive Committee. The statement released by the MLC affirms that it "will respect the position of each congregation to request, or not to request, the credentialing of an LGBTQ+ person (including someone in a same-gender marriage) and will process the request."

The decision to open credentialing in ACC comes after a time of listening and discernment with ACC delegates on February 4, 2023. During this gathering at Forest Hills Mennonite Church, delegates read statements from their congregations on what their relationship to the Conference means and what extending credentials to LGBTQ+ individuals would mean for their congregation. Delegates also had opportunities to share personal feedback and counsel for the Ministerial Leadership Committee in table groups. This feedback was reviewed and discussed before a decision was made.

During delegate sharing, a majority of ACC congregations and delegates expressed support for expanding credentialing opportunities to LGBTQ+ individuals, including both congregations that have discerned they are ready to call an LGBTQ+ individual to ministry and congregations that respect this position held by other congregations. Other responses shared how difficult such a change would be for their congregation to accept.

One delegate noted the feeling of sadness from individuals approaching the topic from opposing perspectives. "Some are sad for the ways that LGBTQ+ people have been harmed and excluded, while others feel like the conference is taking them in a direction they don't want to go."

Others noted their appreciation for the allowance of theological diversity among congregations. "We like that congregations are given freedom to minister within their own contexts." Several congregations and individuals noted their willingness to affirm a change in conference policy to include LGBTQ+ individuals if necessary, although they individually could not agree.

Another theme heard throughout the morning conversations was a desire to extend care and affirmation for those individuals and congregations for which LGBTQ+ inclusion will be difficult. Many heard how difficult a change in credentialing policy will be for several ACC congregations and expressed concern for the difficult

conversations likely to continue in these congregations.

All congregational responses shared during the morning session included deep appreciation for the work of the conference in supporting congregations and providing paths to relationship.

Delegates were not asked to vote on a new credentialing policy because ACC's bylaws and procedures give the MLC the final say on when to extend or withhold credentials, in collaboration with the Executive Committee on controversial matters.


A prayer team was convened during the special delegate session to listen for the Spirit in the times of sharing. Klaudia Smucker, Christine Good Shenk and Christy Heatwole Kauffman shared some of what they heard during a closing time of blessing and prayer. They noted hearing the appreciation for being something bigger than an individual congregation and a common desire to seek God's direction together, regardless of the day's outcome.

ACC leaders felt it important to come to a final decision on LGBTQ+ credentialing following the May 2022 vote by Mennonite Church USA delegates approving the Resolution for Repentance and Transformation which repealed the 2001 Membership Guidelines and called for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA individuals in the church.

Since credentialing is the sole responsibility of conferences, MLC felt a time of processing and discernment should take place to decide whether ACC's practices would follow the direction decided by MC USA delegates.

ACC also has several LGBTQ+ individuals serving in ministry positions who have not yet been granted a credential by the Conference. In February 2020 MLC received a request to interview and credential an individual in a same-sex marriage. The committee interviewed them and unanimously agreed that, if not for the question of same-sex marriage, they would move forward with granting a License Toward Ordination.

The recent action by MLC will give LGBTQ+ individuals, including those in a same-sex marriage, equal opportunity for a ministry credential through Atlantic Coast Conference. MLC will process any requests for credentialing brought by an ACC congregation. Congregations retain the right to request, or not to request, the credentialing of an LGBTQ+ person.

There remains strong diversity in ACC on the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion and a host of other questions. ACC since its beginning has affirmed this theological spread and has celebrated the diverse ways that ACC congregations do ministry in their communities. ACC and MC USA continue to view the congregation as the primary unit of the church with broad authority to do ministry as they discern in their own contexts. 



Above: Sean Reece, delegate of New Holland Mennonite Church, shares with his table group. Responses and counsel were recorded by table leaders and shared with Executive and Ministerial Leadership Committees.

Below: Prayer team members Klaudia Smucker, Christine Good Shenk and Christy Heatwole Kauffman confer during a group discussion time.



Leadership Transitions

Beginnings:

Eszter Bjorkman (Carl) was approved for a License Toward Ordination for her role as Associate Pastor at Neffsville Mennonite Church. She began on July 5, 2022.

Gene Hagenberger began as interim pastor at Hebron Mennonite Church. Gene has served in a variety of pastoral and oversight roles in the Church of the Brethren.

Jon Landis began as Pastor at Oley Valley Mennonite Church in January.

Kate Andre began as interim pastor with the Mennonite Congregation of Boston in November.

Karyn Nancarvis (Tim) was approved for Ordination for her chaplaincy role at Garden Spot Village. She has served in her role since 2020. She is also completing her

final term as the ACC Youth Committee Chair. Karyn attends Laurel Street Mennonite Church.

Pam Brubaker (Dave) was approved for Ordination for her chaplaincy role at Lancaster General Hospital. Pam attends Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster.

Randy Keener (Emily) was approved for Ordination for his role as Director of Chaplaincy Care and Education at Lancaster General Health. Randy attends Laurel Street Mennonite Church.

Endings:

Mick Sommers (Julie) ended his interim role at North Baltimore Mennonite Church on January 27, 2023.






Joanne Dietzel affirmed as next Executive Conference Minister

ACC's Executive Committee is excited to share with you that after unanimous delegate affirmation Joanne Dietzel will serve as the next Executive Conference Minister of Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). Joanne will succeed Merv Stoltzfus, who will retire on March 31 after 35 years of ministry with ACC. Her role will begin April 3.

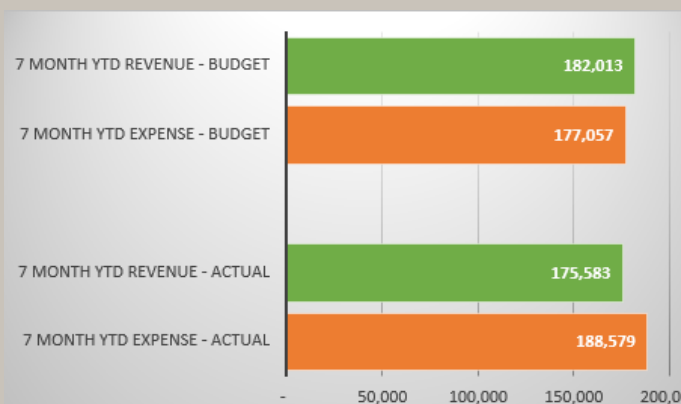
Joanne has faithfully served in ministry for many years and has excelled in her current role as a Conference Minister for ACC. She possesses a deep love and understanding of the conference, specifically of the leaders and congregations which compose it. Serving as Executive Conference Minister will allow her to continue supporting congregations as a pastor to their pastors, while also providing the administrative skills and needed leadership to the role.

Joanne's familiarity with ACC will also provide stability during a season of church life where much feels uncertain. Her passion, love, and desire to see ACC thrive was clearly evident to both the Search and Executive Committees who recommended Joanne to delegates.

Many thanks to the Search Committee who met with several excellent candidates and made the initial recommendation: Todd Gusler, chair, Jannat Veras, Sandy Smoker, and Steve Crane.

Please join us at the upcoming Assembly on April 22 where we will celebrate Merv's long ministry to ACC and welcome Joanne to the new role. Thanks to each of you for your continued support of ACC. 

ACC finances at a glance: January 31, 2023 (year-to-date)

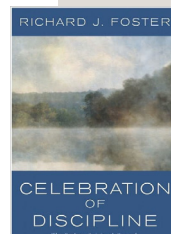


Safe for consumption: media to feed the soul

Each quarter someone in the ACC family will provide a list of new and old content that's worth consuming. This quarter's column comes from Jennie Brown, co-pastor at Bethel Mennonite Church.



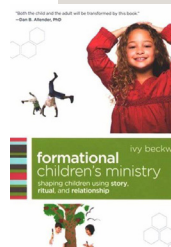
The Four Winds by Kristen Hannah - A historical fiction novel about a family and hardships during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. This story brought to life the horrendous difficulties so many experienced in that time. I have read several great books by this author.



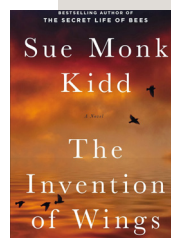
Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster - This practical book about spiritual disciplines would work well for a class or study group. Foster explains the inward, outward, and corporate spiritual disciplines in a practical way. I especially appreciate the chapters on submission and service.



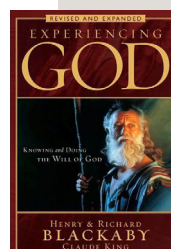
Pray-as-you-go app has a contemplative prayer devotional for each new day and is easy to use. I am always blessed when I slow down and pray with/listen to the music, scripture, thought provoking questions, and sending.



Formational Children's Ministry by Ivy Beckwith - This is a book about shaping children using story, ritual, and relationship; and I get excited about possibilities as I read it. Concepts and ideas presented include bringing the Bible story to life and encouraging generations to learn and engage in faith together.



Invention of Wings by Sue Monk Kidd - This historical fiction novel set in the urban south in the early 1800's is written in the perspectives of both a wealthy girl and her slave. It helped me gain some understanding of the struggles and conflicts of slaves and of those who worked for liberation.



Experiencing God by Henry & Richard Blackaby - Our congregation received copies of this book as a gift in memory of a beloved member. As we studied and read together, we were challenged to experience God individually and as a church. The book or workbook are great for study groups.

Healthy Boundaries: Women and men working together in ministry

By Dorcas Lehman and Joanne Dietzel


Within our conference, women and men often work together in ministry teams of all types. Thanks be to God! How is that going? Are we keeping the healthy in healthy boundaries? Can we name the nature of relationships and the work habits that keep integrity in our mutual ministry? Do we make space to reflect upon areas for growth?

Healthy boundaries are both the work of people and gifts of God's Spirit. The task of naming and tending boundaries is never once and done but is ongoing and dynamic. Every leadership or pastoral team, whether in congregations, committees, or nonprofits, needs to build in reflective pauses for this work that is practical, spiritual, and hopeful.

Whole courses, books, and websites are devoted

to training that can take you deeper. But here is one simple tool you could use to start a conversation in your committee or leadership group. You might take this to your board room, for example, or to your pastoral team, pastor-congregation committee, or Sunday school class.

Take a look at the questions below. Circle questions you want to talk about. Write down your own questions. And if you'd like to talk with someone in conference circles, don't hesitate to contact Joanne Dietzel at joanned@atlanticcoastconference.net.

If you want to dig deeper into the topic of mixed-gender teams, consider studying *Becoming Colleagues: Women and Men Serving Together in Faith* by Carol E. Becker (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 2000). Through research, Becker identified nine behaviors of effective mixed-gender teams. In the concluding chapter, she offers questions for personal reflection and team discussion. 

How and when do you discuss healthy boundaries?

1. Is your congregation or workplace a setting that most people would describe as a good place, with good spirit, where there is good communication, and boundaries are honored? If yes, how is that true? If not, where could you start to change that?

2. How do leaders use job descriptions and role definitions to establish boundaries? Is there more that could be done in this area?

3. Within mixed-gender teams, are members aware of the different gifts that women and men can bring, as well as the "traps" that women or men can fall into? Is there a particular question that is current for you?

4. In some circles these days, people are asking, how much interaction can men and women have in the workplace without crossing lines? Does this question resonate in your setting? If so, how might you create space for that conversation? If that conversation doesn't seem necessary, can you identify ways you have created the healthy culture that you want and value?

5. In a leadership or pastoral team, there usually will be power differentials, often for good reasons.

6. How well does your team use power constructively? How do team members share power, while staying true to the different roles and responsibilities of each one?

7. In pastoral or other leadership roles, how are you devoting time and energy to strengthening your own intimate relationships? How do you honor those relationships in others' lives?

8. The pastoral role is unique in some ways. Ministers are expected to build relationships where intimacy and trust can grow. If you are a pastor, do you recognize your own risk areas? And, if you are in a leadership role, if you see behavior that risks violating physical, emotional, or work intimacy boundaries, what would you do?

9. As pastors, do you have peers with whom you meet regularly and who hold you accountable? Who is in that circle of accountability?

10. Is everyone in your congregation aware of Atlantic Coast Conference's Policy & Procedures for responding to ministerial misconduct? How might you provide that reporting information in a way that increases awareness and adds another layer of safety to your congregational culture?

11. Is there a question about boundaries that needs to be asked that has not yet been named?



Healthy Boundaries Training

HB 101 & 102 Courses Available

Credentialed leaders of Atlantic Coast Conference are required to complete the Healthy Boundaries 101 course to keep their credentials in good standing. Training is also open to others interested in learning more. The following opportunities have open registration now. Additional opportunities may be found at the MC USA webpage: mennoniteusa.org/ministry/church-vitality/healthy-boundaries-training/

April 25 & 27, 2023 – Healthy Boundaries 101 via Zoom – Western District Conference. Details at mennowdc.org/healthy-boundaries-training/

May 4, 2023 – Healthy Boundaries 201 via Zoom – Western District Conference. Details at mennowdc.org/healthy-boundaries-training/

November 15, 2023 – Healthy Boundaries 101 via Zoom - Atlantic Coast Conference. Details at bit.ly/HealthyBoundaries_101

Upcoming Events



ACC Youth Game Nights

Friday April 21 & Sunday July 16, 2023

James Street & Landisville Mennonite Churches

Senior high youth groups are invited to quarterly game nights hosted by the ACC Youth Committee. Join us for games, snacks, and time together with other ACC youth groups. 2024 events will be held January 14, April 19, and July 21. Save the dates and contact Brook Musselman for details at brookm@atlanticcoastconference.net.



ACC Annual Assembly

April 22, 2023

African Community Church of Lancaster, Manheim, PA

Plan to join us for the 2023 Annual Assembly! The morning session will feature delegate business and a celebration of Merv Stoltzfus's ministry. After lunch we'll hear from three speakers who will lead a session on "re-storying mission". These conversations, led by Emily Ralph Servant, Eric Frey Martin and Nelson Okanya, will cover where we've been and where we're going as we notice God's presence and join God's work in the world. Details and registration at atlanticcoastconference.net/assembly/



#MennoCon23

July 3-8, 2023

Registration is OPEN! MennoCon23, Mennonite Church USA's largest faith formation gathering, will be held July 3-8, 2023, in Kansas City, Missouri. There will be programming for all ages, including a one-day Climate Summit for youth and young adults. Details at convention.mennoniteusa.org/



ACC Fall Youth Retreat

September 8-10, 2023

SAVE THE DATE! ACC youth groups are invited to the 2022 Fall Youth Retreat at Refreshing Mountain. The weekend will include daily worship and resource times, nighttime ultimate frisbee and times for youth groups to connect at the beginning of a new year. Look for more details in June.